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THE THIRTEEN TRAVELLERS

By Hugh Walpole

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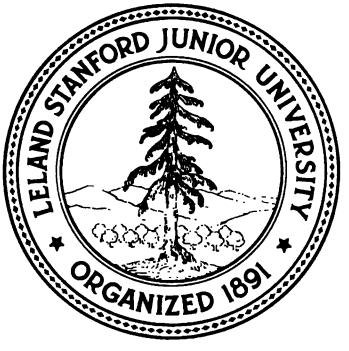

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THE THIRTEEN TRAVELLERS

BY

HUGH WALPOLE
Author of "The Captive," "Jeremy," "The Secret City," "The Green Mirror," Etc.

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TO

JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER

IN FRIENDSHIP

"After they were blown up they were blown down again, and then had to pause for a moment to get their breath. . ."—*Hanspickle.*

HENRY GALLEON

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THE THIRTEEN TRAVELLERS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

No character in this book is drawn from any person now living.

THE THIRTEEN TRAVELLERS

I

ABSALOM JAY

SOMEWHERE in the early nineties was Absalom Jay's first period. He was so well-known a figure in London at that time as to be frequently caricatured in the weekly society journals, and Spy's "Absalom," that appeared in the 1894 volume of *Vanity Fair*, is one of his most successful efforts. In those days were any one so ignorant as to be compelled to ask who Jay was he would probably receive the answer: "Oh, don't you know? He's a cousin of John Beaminster's. He founded the "Warrington" with Pemmy Stevens. He's . . . Oh, I don't know. . . . He goes everywhere. Knows more people than anyone else in London, I should imagine."

Spy's caricature of him has caught that elegant smartness that was Absalom's most marked individuality, *too* smart critics have been known to say; and certainly, if the ideal of correct dress is that no one should notice your clothes Absalom was not correct. Everyone always noticed his clothes. But here again

one must be fair. It may not have been altogether his clothes that one noticed. From very early years his hair was snow-white, and he wore it brushed straight back from his pink forehead in wavy locks. He wore also a little white tufted Imperial. He had an eyeglass that hung on a thick black cord. His favourite colour was a dark blue, and with this he wore spats (in summer of a truly terrific whiteness), a white slip, black tie, and pearl pin. He wore wonderful boots and shoes and was said to have more of these than any other man in London. It was also said that his feet were the smallest (masculine) in the British Isles. He was made altogether on a very small scale. He was not, I should think, more than five-feet-six in height, but was all in perfect proportion. His enemies, of whom he had, like everyone else, a few, said that his wonderful pink complexion was not entirely Nature's work, but here his enemies lied. Even at the very last he did not give way to the use of cosmetics. He was the kindest-hearted little man in the world, and in the days of his prosperity was as happy as the day was long. He lived entirely for Society, and because this is intended to be a true portrait, I must admit that there was something of the snob in his character. He himself admitted it frankly. "I like to be with people of rank," he would say, "simply because I'm more comfortable with them. I know just what to say to Johnny Beaminster, and I'm tongue-tied with the wife of my barber. *Que voulez-vous?*"

I'm afraid, however, that it went a little further than that. In the Season his looking-glass was thronged with cards, invitations to dinner and dances and musical

evenings. "I live for Society," he said, "as some men live for killing pheasants, and other men for piling up money. My fun is as good as another man's. At any rate I get good company."

It was his intention to be seen at every London function, public or private, that could be considered a first-class function; people wondered how he got about as he did. It seemed as though there must be three or four Absaloms.

His best time was during the last few years of King Edward VII.'s reign. His funny little anxious face could be frequently seen in those groups of celebrities invited to meet the King at some famous house-party. It was said that the King liked his company, but I don't know how that can have been because Absalom was never in his brightest days very amusing. He talked a good deal, but always said just what everyone else said. He was asked everywhere because he was so safe, because he was so willing to fetch and carry, and because he knew exactly what it was that ladies wanted. He entertained only a little in return, but nobody minded that because, as everyone knew, "he really hadn't a penny in the world"—which meant that he had about £1,500 a year in various safe investments.

A year before the war he was seized with a little gust of speculation. Against the advice of "Tony" Pennant, who looked after his investments for him, he ventured to buy here and sell there with rather serious results. He pulled up just in time to save disaster, but he had to give up his little house in Knightsbridge and took a flat at Hortons in Duke

Street. Although this was a "service" flat he still retained his man James, who had been with him for a number of years and knew his habits to perfection.

He made his rooms at Hortons charming, and he had the dark blue curtains and the gold mirror bristling with invitations, and the old coloured prints and the big, signed photographs of Queen Alexandra and the Duchess of Wrexe in their silver frames, and the heavy silver cigarette-box that King Edward had given him, all in their accustomed places. Of course, the flat was small. His silver-topped bottles and silver-backed brushes, and rows of boots and shoes and the two big trouser-presses simply overwhelmed his bedroom.

But he was over sixty-five now (although he would have been horrified if he thought that you knew it) and he didn't need much space—moreover, he was always out.

Then came the war, and the first result of this was that James joined up! During those first August days Absalom hadn't fancied that the war would touch him at all, although he was hotly patriotic and cried out daily at the "Warrington" that he wished he were a lad again and could shoulder a gun.

James's departure frightened him; then "Tony" Pennant explained to him that his investments were not so secure as they had been and he'd be lucky if any of them brought him in anything. And of course the whole of his social world vanished—no more parties, no more balls, no more Ascots and Goodwoods, no more shooting in Scotland, no more opera. He bustled around then in a truly remarkable manner and attacked

his friends with the pertinacity of a bluebottle. The war was not a month old before Bryce-Drummond secured him a job in one of the Ministries at six hundred a year. It was not a very difficult job (it consisted for the most part in interviewing eager young men, assuring them that he would do his best for them, and then sending them along to somebody else). He had a room to himself, and a lady typist who looked after him like a mother. He was quite delighted when he discovered that she was a daughter of the Bishop of Polchester and very well connected. She was most efficient and did everything for him.

He took his work very seriously indeed, and was delighted to be "doing his bit." No one knew exactly what it was that he did at the Ministry, and he himself was very vague about it, but he hinted at great things and magnificent company. During those first years when there were so many wonderful rumours, he hinted and hinted and hinted. "Well, I mustn't mention names, of course; but you can take it from me——" and people really did think he *did* know. He had been in the closest touch with so many great people before the war that it was only natural that he should be in touch with them still. As a matter of fact he knew nothing except what his typist told him. He led an extremely quiet life during these years, but he didn't mind that because he understood that it was the right thing to do. All the best people were absorbed in their work—even old Lady Agatha Beaminster was running a home for Serbians, and Rachel Seddon was a V.A.D. in France, and old "Plumtree" Caudle was a Special

Constable. He did not therefore feel left out of things, because there was nothing really to be left out of. Moreover, he was so hard up that it was safer to be quiet. All the more would he enjoy himself when the war was over.

But as the years went on and there seemed to be no sign of the war being over, he began to be querulous. He missed James terribly, and when in the summer of 1917 he heard that James was killed in Mesopotamia it was a very serious blow. He seemed to be suddenly quite alone in the world. In Hortons now they employed only women, and the girl straight from Glebeshire who "valeted" him seemed to have but little time to listen to his special needs, being divided up between four flats and finding it all she could do, poor girl, to satisfy them all. "After the war," Mr. Nix, the manager of Hortons, assured Absalom, "we shall have men again!"

"After the war!"—those three simple little words became the very Abracadabra of Absalom's life. "After the war" everything would be as it had always been—prices would go down, Society would come up, his gold mirror would once again be stuck about with invitations, he would find a successor to James, and a little house. What would he live on? Oh, that would be all right. They would keep him at the Ministry. He was so useful there that he couldn't conceive that they would ever get on without him—there would be his work, of course, and probably they would raise his salary. He was an optimist about the future. Nothing made him so indignant as unjustified pessimism. When someone

talked pessimistically it was as though he, Absalom Jay, were being personally threatened. Throughout the terrible spring of 1918 he remained optimistic. "Britain *couldn't* be beaten"—by which he meant that Absalom Jay must be assured of his future comforts. In spite of all that had happened he was as incapable in June, 1918, as he had been in June, 1914, of imagining a different world, a different balance of moral and ethical values. Then the tide turned. During that summer and early autumn of 1918 Absalom was as happy as he had ever been. He simply lived for the moment when "life would begin again." He began to go out a little, to pay calls, to visit an old friend or two. He found changes, of course. His own contemporaries seemed strangely old; many of them had died, many of them had shattered nerves, many were frightened of the future.

If they were frightened it was their own fault, he declared. They *would* talk of ridiculous things like the Russian Revolution—nothing angered him more than to hear chatter about the Russian Revolution—as though that absurd affair with its cut-throats and Bolsheviks and Jews and murderers could have anything to do with a *real* country like England.

It was all the fault of our idiotic government; one regiment of British soldiers and *that* trouble would have been over. . . . No, he'd no patience. . . .

November 11th came, and with it the Armistice; he actually rode all the way down Whitehall on a lorry and waved a flag. He *was* excited, it seemed as though the whole world were crying, "Hurray! Absalom Jay!

You were right, after all. You shall have your reward."

He pictured to himself what was coming: 1919 would be the year; let those dirty ruffians try and imitate Russian methods. They would see what they would get. He resumed his old haughtiness of demeanour to dependents. It was necessary in these days to show them their place. Not that he was never kind. When they behaved properly he was very kind indeed. To Fanny, the portress at Hortons—a nice girl with a ready smile and an agreeable willingness to do *anything*, however tiresome—he was delightful, asking her about her relations and once telling her that he was grateful for what she did. He was compelled, however, to speak haughtily to Rose, the "valet." He was forced often to ring twice for her, and once when she came running and out of breath and he showed her that she had put some of his waistcoats into one drawer and some into another, thereby making it very difficult for him to find them, she actually tossed her head and muttered something. He spoke to her very kindly then, and showed her how things were done in the best houses, because, after all, poor child, she was straight up from the country. However, she did not take his kindliness in at all the right spirit, but burst out angrily that "times was different now, and one was as good as another"—a shocking thing to say, and savouring directly of Bolshevism.

He was getting into the habit of calling almost everything Bolshevism.

Then the first blow fell. He found a letter on his

table at the Ministry; he opened it carelessly and read therein that as the war was in process of being "wound up," changes were taking place that would compel the Ministry, most reluctantly, to do without Mr. Jay's services. Would he mind taking a month's notice? . . .

He would mind very much indeed—Mind? It was as though a thunderbolt had struck him on the very top of his neat little head. He stood in front of the Ministerial fireplace, his little legs extended, the letter trembling in his hand, his eyes, if the truth must be spoken, flushed with tears. Dismissed! With a month's notice! He would speak . . . he would protest . . . he would abuse. . . . In the end, of course, he did nothing. Bryce-Drummond said he was so very sorry, "but really everythin' was tumblin' about one's ears these days," and offered him a cigarette. Lord John, to whom he appealed, looked distressed and said it was "a damn shame; upon his word, he didn't know what we were all coming to. . . ."

Absalom Jay was left; he realised that he could do nothing; he retired into Hortons.

There was in his soul a fund of optimism, or rather, to speak more accurately, it took him time to realise the shifting sands upon which his little house was built. He made now the very most of Hortons. It is true that time began to lie heavy upon his hands. He rose very late in the morning, having his cup of tea and boiled egg at nine, his bath at ten; he read the *Morning Post* for an hour; then the barber, Merritt, from next door, came in to shave him and give him the news of the day. Merritt was a most amusing dark and dapper little

man. In him was the very spirit of St. James's, and the Lord only knows how many businesses he carried on beside his ostensible hair-dressing one. He could buy anything for you, and sell anything, too! And his gossip! Well, really, Absalom had thought himself a good gossip in his day, but he had never been anything to Merritt! Of course, half-a-crown was a good deal for a shave, and Absalom was not sure whether in these days he ought to afford it—"my only luxury" he called it.

He did not see many of his friends this Christmas time. They were all out of London he supposed. He was a little surprised that the Beaumonts hadn't asked him to spend Christmas at Hautoix. In the old days that invitation had been as regular as the Waits. However, they had lost their eldest son in the Cambrai fighting. They were having no parties this Christmas, of course.

He had thought that the Seddons might ask him. He got on so well with Roddy and Rachel. They sent him a card "from Rollo," their baby. Kind of them to remember him! So he busied himself about the flat. He was preparing for the future—for that wonderful time when the war would be really and truly over, and the world as it had been in the old days. His life was centred in Hortons and the streets that surrounded it. He could be seen every morning walking up Duke Street into Piccadilly. He knew every shop by heart, the picture shops that seemed to be little offspring of the great "Christie's" round the corner, with their coloured plates from Ackermann's "Microcosm," and

Pierce Egan, and their oils of large, full-bosomed eighteenth century ladies; and the shops with the china and the cabinets and the lacquer (everything very expensive indeed); and Bottome's, the paper shop, with Mr. Bottome's humourous comments on the day's politics chalked on to a slate near the door, and the *Vie Parisienne* very large in the window; then there was the shop at the corner of Jermyn Street, with the silk dressing-gowns of dazzling colours, and the latest fashions with pink silk vests, pyjamas; and the great tobacconists and the wine-windows of Fortnum and Masons—at last the familiar broad splendours of Piccadilly itself. Up and down the little old streets that had known all the famous men of their day, that had lodged Thackeray and Swift and Dryden, and now lodged Mr. Bottomley and the author of *Mutt and Jeff*, the motors rolled and hooted and honked, and the messenger boys whistled, and the flower-man went up and down with his barrow, and everything was as expensive and pleasant and humourous as could be. All this Absalom Jay adopted. He was in his own mind, although he did not know it, King of St. James's, and he felt that they must all be very glad to have him there, and that rents must have gone up since it was known that he had taken his residence among them.

He even went in one day and expostulated with Mr. Bottome for having the *Daily Herald* in his window. Mr. Bottome agreed with him that it was not a "nice" paper, but he also added that sinister sentence that Absalom was getting now so tired of hearing that

"these were strange times. 'E didn't know what we were coming to."

"Nonsense, my good man," said Absalom rather tartly, "England isn't Russia."

"Looks damned like it sometimes," said Mr. Bottome.

Then as the year 1919 extended Absalom began to feel terribly lonely. This fear of loneliness was rapidly becoming a concrete and definite terror, lurking behind the curtains in his flat, ready to spring out upon him at any moment. Absalom had never in all his life been alone. There had always been people around him. Where now were they all? Men now were being demobilised, houses were opening again, hospitals were closing, dances were being given, and still his gold mirror remained innocent of invitations. He fancied, too (he was becoming very sensitive to impressions), that the men in the "Warrington" were not so eager to see him as they had been. He went to the "Warrington" a great deal now "to be cheered up." He talked to men to whom five years ago he would not have condescended to say "Good-morning"—to Isaac Monteluke, for instance, and Bandy Manners. Where were all his old friends? They did not come to the club any longer, it seemed. He could never find a bridge four now with whom he was really at home. This may have been partly because he was nervous these days of losing money—he could not afford it—and he did not seem to have his old control of his temper. Then his brain was not quite so active as it had been. He could not remember the cards. . . .

One day he heard some fellow say: "Well, if I'd

had my way I'd chloroform everyone over sixty. We've had enough of the old duds messing all the world up."

Chloroform all the old duds! What a terrible thing to say? Why, five years ago it had been the other way. Who cared then what a young man said? What could he know? After all, it was the older men who had had the experience, who knew life, who could tell the others. . . .

He found himself laying down the law about things —giving ultimatums like—"They ought to be strung up on lamp-posts—pandering to the ignorant lower classes—that's what it is."

If there had been one thing above all others that Absalom had hated all his life it had been rudeness—there was the unforgivable sin. As a young man he had been deferential to his elders, and so in his turn he expected young men to be to him now. But they were not. No, they were not. He had positively to give up the "Warrington" because of the things that the young men said.

There was a new trouble now—the trouble of money. His investments were paying very badly, and the income tax was absurd. He wrote to the *Times* about his income tax, and they did not print his letter—did not print it when they printed the letters of every sort of nobody. Everything was so expensive that it took all his courage to look at his weekly bill. He must eat less; one ate, he read in the paper, far more than one needed. So he gave up his breakfast, having only a cup of coffee and a roll, as he had often done in France in the old days. He was aware suddenly that his

clothes were beginning to look shabby. Bacon, the valet, informed him of this. He did not like Bacon; he found himself, indeed, sighing for the departed Rose. Bacon was austere and inhuman. He spoke as seldom as possible. He had no faults, he pressed clothes perfectly, kept drawers in absolute order, did not drink Absalom's claret nor smoke Absalom's cigarettes. No faults—but what an impossible man! Absalom was afraid of him. He drew his little body together under the bedclothes when Bacon called him in the morning because of Bacon's ironical eyes. Bacon gave him his *Times* as though he said: "How dare you take in the *Times*—spend threepence a day when you are as poor as you are?"

It was because of Bacon that Absalom gave up Merritt. He did not dare to have him when Bacon knew his poverty.

"I'm going to shave myself in the future, Merritt," he said; "it's only laziness having you." Merritt was politely sorry, but he was not very deeply grieved. Why should he be when he had the King's valet and Sir Edward Hawksbury, the famous K.C., and Borden Hunt, the dramatist, to shave every morning?

But Absalom missed him terribly. He was now indeed alone. No more gossip, no more laughter over other people's weaknesses, no more hearty agreement over the wicked selfishness of the lower orders.

Absalom gave up the *Times* because he could not bear to see the lower orders encouraged. All this talk about their not having enough to live on—wicked nonsense! It was people like Absalom who had not enough

to live on. He wrote again to the *Times* and said so, and again they did not publish his letter.

Then he woke from sleep one night, heard the clock strike three, and was desperately frightened. He had had a dream. What dream? He could not remember. He only knew that in the course of it he had become very, very old; he had been in a room without fire and without light; he had been in prison—faces had glared at him, cruel faces, young, sneering, menacing faces. . . . He was going to die. . . . He awoke with a scream.

Next day he read himself a very serious lecture. He was becoming morbid; he was giving in; he was allowing himself to be afraid of things. He must pull himself up. He was quite severe to Bacon, and reprimanded him for bringing his breakfast at a quarter to nine instead of half-past eight. He made out then a list of houses that he would visit. They had forgotten him —he must admit that. But how natural it was! After all this time. Everyone had forgotten everybody. Why, he had forgotten all sorts of people! Could not remember their names!

For months now he had been saying, "After the war," and now here "after the war" was. It was May, and already Society was looking something like itself. Covent Garden was open again. Soon there would be Ascot and Henley and Goodwood; and the Peace Celebrations, perhaps, if only those idiots at Versailles moved a little more quickly! He felt the old familiar stir in his blood as he saw the red letters and the green pillars repainted, saw the early summer sun shine upon

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the glittering windows of Piccadilly, saw the green shadows of Hyde Park shift and tremble against the pale blue of the evening sky, saw, once again, the private cars quiver and tremble behind the policeman's hand in the Circus; saw Delysia's name over the Pavilion, and the posters of the evening papers, and the fountains splashing in Trafalgar Square.

He put on his best clothes and went out.

He called upon Mary, Countess of Gosport, the Duchess of Aisles, Lady Glenrobert, Mrs. Leo Torsch, and dear Rachel Seddon. At the Countess of Gosport's he found a clergyman, a companion, and a Chow; at the Duchess of Aisles' four young Guardsmen, two girls, and Isaac Monteluke, who had the insolence to patronise him; at Lady Glenrobert's a vast crowd of men and women rehearsing for a Peace pageant shortly to be given at the Albert Hall; at Mrs. Leo Torsch's an incredible company of artists, writers, and actors, people unwashed and unbrushed, at sight of whom Absalom's very soul trembled; at dear Rachel's charming young people, all of whom looked right through him as though he were an easy and undisturbing ghost.

He came back from these visits a weary, miserable, and tired little man. Even Rachel had seemed to have no time to give him. . . . An incredible lassitude spread through all his bones. As he entered the portals of No. 2 a boy passed him with a *Pall Mall* poster. "Railwaymen issue Ultimatum." In his room he read a *Times* leader, in which it said that the lower classes were starving and had nowhere to sleep. And they called the *Times* a reactionary paper! The lower

classes starving! What about the upper classes? With his door closed, in his own deep privacy, surrounded by his little gods, his mirror, his silver frames, and his boot-trees, he wept—bitterly, helplessly, like a child.

From that moment he had no courage. Enemies seemed to be on every side. Everywhere he was insulted. If he went out boys pushed against him, taxi-men swore at him, in the shops they were rude to him! There was never room in the omnibuses, the taxis were too expensive, and the Tubes! After an attempt to reach Russell Square by Tube he vowed he would never enter a Tube door again. He was pushed, hustled, struck in the stomach, sworn at both by attend ants and passengers, jammed between stout women, hurled off his feet, spoken to by a young soldier because he did not give up his seat to a lady who haughtily refused it when he offered. . . . Tubes! . . . never again—never, oh, never again!

What then to do? Walking tired him desperately. Everywhere seemed now so far away!

So he remained in his flat; but now Hortons itself was different. Now that he was confined to it it was very small, and he was always tumbling over things. A pipe burst one morning, and his bathroom was flooded. The bathroom wall paper began to go the strangest and most terrible colours—it was purple and pink and green, and there were splotches of white mildew that seemed to move before your eyes as you lay in your bath and watched them. Absalom went to Mr. Nix, and Mr. Nix said that it should be seen to at once, but day after day went by and nothing was done. When

Mr. Nix was appealed to he said rather restively that he was very sorry but he was doing his best—labour was so difficult to get now—"You could not rely on the men."

"But they've got to come!" screamed Absalom.

Mr. Nix shrugged his shoulders; from his lips fell those fatal and now so monotonous words:

"We're living in changed times, Mr. Jay."

Changed times! Absalom should think we were. Everyone was ruder and ruder and ruder. Bills were beginning to worry him terribly—such little bills, but men would come and wait downstairs in the hall for them.

The loneliness increased and wrapped him closer and closer. His temper was becoming atrocious as he well knew. Bacon now paid no attention to his wishes, his meals were brought up at any time, his rooms were not cleaned, his silver was tarnished. All he had to do was to complain to Mr. Nix, who ruled Hortons with a rod of iron, and allowed no incivilities or slackness. But he was afraid to do that; he was afraid of the way that Bacon would treat him afterwards. Always, everywhere now he saw this increasing attention that was paid to the lower classes. Railwaymen, miners, hairdressers, dockers, bakers, waiters, they struck, got what they wanted and then struck for more.

He hated the lower classes—hated them, hated them! The very sight of a working man threw him into a frenzy. What about the upper classes and the middle classes! Did you ever see a word in the paper about them? Never!

He was not well, his heart troubled him very much. Sometimes he lay on his sofa battling for breath. But he did not dare to go to a doctor. He could not afford a doctor.

But God is merciful. He put a period to poor Absalom's unhappiness. When it was plain that this world was no longer a place for Absalom's kind He gathered Absalom to His bosom.

And it was in this way. There arrived suddenly one day a card: "The Duchess of Aisles . . . Dancing." His heart beat high at the sight of it. He had to lie down on his sofa to recover himself. He stuck his card into the mirror and was compelled to say something to Bacon about it. Bacon did not seem to be greatly impressed at the sight.

He dressed on the great evening with the utmost care. The sight of his bathroom affected him; it seemed to cover him with pink spots and mildew, but he shook that off from him and boldly ventured forth to Knightsbridge. He found an immense party gathered there. Many, many people. . . . He didn't seem to recognise any of them. The Duchess herself had apparently forgotten him. He reminded her. He crept about; he felt strangely as though at any moment someone might shoot him in the back. Then he found Mrs. Charles Clinton, one of his hostesses of the old days. She was kind but preoccupied. Then he discovered Tom Wardour—old Tom Wardour, the stupidest man in London and the greediest. Nevertheless he was glad to see him.

"By Jove, old man, you *do* look seedy," Tom said; "what have you been doing to yourself?"

Tactless of Tom, that! He felt more than ever that someone was going to shoot him in the back. He crept away and hid himself in a corner. He dozed a little, then woke to hear his own name. A woman was speaking of him. He recognized Mrs. Clinton's voice.

"Whom do you think I saw just now? . . . Yes, old Absalom Jay. Like a visit from the dead. Yes, and *so* old. You know how smart he used to be. He looked quite shabby, poor old thing. Oh no, of course, he was always stupid. But now—oh, dreadful! . . . I assure you he gave me the creeps. Yes, of course, he belonged to that old world before the war. *Doesn't* it seem a long time ago? Centuries. What I say is that one can't believe one was alive then at all. . . ."

Gave her the creeps! Gave Mrs. Clinton the creeps! He felt as though his premonition had been true, and someone *had* shot him in the back. He crept away, out of the house, right away.

He crept into a Tube. The trains were crowded. He had to hang on to a strap. At Hyde Park Corner two workmen got in; they had been drinking together. Very big men they were. They stood one on each side of Absalom and lurched about. Absalom was pushed hither and thither.

"Where the 'ell are you comin' to?" one said.

The other knocked Absalom's hat off as though by an accident. Then the former elaborately picked it up and offered it with a low bow, digging Absalom in the stomach as he did so.

"'Ere y'are, my lord," he said. They roared with laughter. The whole carriage laughed. At Dover Street Absalom got out. He hurried through the streets, and the tears were pouring down his cheeks. He could not stop them; he seemed to have no control over them. They were not his tears. . . . He entered Hortons, and in the lift hid his face so that Fannie should not see that he was crying.

He closed his door behind him, did not turn on the lights, found the sofa, and cowered down there as though he were hiding from someone.

The tears continued to race down his cheeks. Then suddenly it seemed as though the walls of the bathroom, all blotched and purple, all stained with creeping mildew, closed in the dark about him.

He heard a voice cry—a working-man's voice—he did not hear the words, but the walls towered above him and the white mildew expanded into jeering, hideous, triumphant faces.

His heart leapt and he knew no more.

* * * * * *

Bacon and the maid found him huddled thus on the floor dead next morning.

"Well now," said Bacon, "that's a lucky thing. Young Somerset next door's been wanting this flat. Make a nice suite if he knocks a door through—gives him seven rooms. He'll be properly pleased."

II

FANNY CLOSE

SINCE the second year of the war Fanny Close had been portress at Hortons. It had demanded very much resolution on the part of Mr. Nix to search for a portress. Since time immemorial the halls of Hortons had known only porters. George, the present fine specimen, had been magnificently in service there for the last ten years. However, Mr. Nix was a patriot; he sent his son aged nineteen to the war (his son was only too delighted to go), himself joined the London Air Defences, and then packed off every man and boy in the place.

The magnificent James was the last to go. He had, he said, an ancient mother dependent upon him. Mr. Nix was disappointed in him. He did not live up to his chest measurement. "You're very nearly a shirker," he said to him indignantly. Nevertheless he promised to keep his place open for him. . . .

He had to go out into the highways and by-ways and find women. The right ones were not easily found, and often enough they were disappointing. Mr. Nix was a tremendous disciplinarian, that was why Hortons were the best service flats in the whole of the West End. But he discovered, as many a man had discovered before him, that the discipline that does for a man will not

do nine times out of ten for a woman. Woman has a way of wriggling out of the net of discipline with subtleties unknown to man.

So Mr. Nix discovered. . . . Only with Fanny Close Mr. Nix had no trouble at all. She became at the end of the first week a "jewel," and a jewel to the end of her time she remained.

I don't wish, in these days of stern and unrelenting realism, to draw Dickensian pictures of youth and purity, but the plain truth is that Fanny Close was as good a girl as ever was made. She was good for two reasons, one because she was plain, the other because she had a tiresome sister. The first of these reasons made her humble, the other made her enjoy everything from which her sister was absent twice as much as anyone else would have enjoyed it.

She was twenty-five years of age; the mother had died of pleurisy when the children were babies, and the father, who was something very unimportant in a post office, had struggled for twenty years to keep them all alive, and then caught a cold and died. The only brother had married, and Aggie and Fanny had remained to keep house together. Aggie had always been the beauty of the family, but it had been a beauty without "charm," so that many young men had advanced with beating hearts, gazed with eager eyes, and then walked away, relieved that for some reason or another they had been saved from "putting the question." She had had proposals, of course, but they had never been good enough. At twenty-six she was a disappointed virgin.

Fanny had always been so ready to consider herself the plainer and stupider of the two that it had not been altogether Aggie's fault that she, Aggie, should take, so naturally, the first place. Many a relation had told Fanny that she was too "submissive" and didn't stand up for herself enough, but Fanny shook her head and said that she couldn't be other than she was. The true fact was that deep down in her heart she not only admired her sister, she also hated her. How astonished Aggie would have been had she known this—and how astonished, to be truly platitudinous for a moment, we should all be if we really knew what our nearest and dearest relatives thought of us!

Fanny hated Aggie, but had quite made up her mind that she would never be free of her. How could she be? She herself was far too plain for anyone to want to marry her, and Aggie was apparently settling down inevitably into a bitter old-maidenhood. Then came the war. Fanny was most unexpectedly liberated. Aggie did, of course, try to prevent her escape, but on this occasion Fanny was resolved. She would do what she could to help—the country needed every single woman. At first she washed plates in a canteen, then she ran a lift outside some Insurance office, finally she fell into Mr. Nix's arms, and there she stayed for three years.

She knew from the very first that she would like it. She liked Mr. Nix, she liked the blue uniform provided for her, most of all she liked the "atmosphere" of Hortons, the coloured repose of St. James's, the hall of white and green, the broad staircase, the palms in the

staircase windows, the grandfather's clock near Mr. Nix's office; she even liked her own little rabbit-hutch where were the little boxes for the letters, the cupboard for her own private possessions, the telephone, and a chair for her to sit upon. In a marvellously short time she was the mistress of the whole situation. Mr. Nix could not have believed that he would have missed the marvellous James so little. "Really," he said to Mrs. Nix, "a great discovery, a remarkable find."

"Well, I hope she won't disappoint you," said Mrs. Nix, who was an amiable pessimist. Fanny did not disappoint; she got better and better. Everyone liked her, and she liked everyone.

Because she had as her standard Aggie's grudging and reluctant personality, she naturally found everyone delightful. She was very happy indeed because they all wanted her assistance in one way or another. "Men *are* helpless," was her happy comment after a year's experience at Hortons. She stamped letters for one, delivered telephone messages for another, found addresses for a third, carried bags for a fourth, acted as confidential adviser for a fifth. She was not pretty, of course, but she was much less plain in her uniform than she had been in her private dress. The blue, peaked cap suited her, and managed somehow, in combination with her pince-nez, to give her quite a roguish complexion.

Nevertheless she was looked upon as a serious person —"quite like a man," she reflected with satisfaction. She did not wish to waste her time with flirtations, she wanted to do her job efficiently. It needed great self-

control not to take too active an interest in the affairs of the ladies and gentlemen in her charge. She was, for instance, deeply sorry for poor old Mr. Jay, who was obviously poor and helpless and had no friends. He used to ask her whether "So-and-so" had called, to tell her that he was expecting Lady This, and Lord That to ring up. Of course, they never did. No one ever came to see him. Fanny's heart simply ached for him.

Then there was young Mr. Torby—the Hon. Clive Torby. Fanny thought him the most wonderful figure in London. He was in France and was wounded, went back and was wounded again, this time losing an arm. He had the D.S.O. and M.C., and was simply the most handsome young man in London—but Fanny feared that he was leading a very idle life. He was always happy, always good-tempered, always laughing, but Fanny shivered at the thought of the money that he spent. Lord Dronda, his father, used to come and see him and "remonstrate with him," so the Hon. Clive told Fanny after the interview. But what was the good? All the young ladies came just the same, and the flowers and the fruit and the wine——

"We can only love once, Fanny," the young man declared one day. "And I've been so near kicking the bucket so many times lately that I'm going to make the most of the sunshine."

How could you blame him? At any rate, Fanny couldn't.

There were many others into whose histories and personalities this is neither the time nor place to enter.

Fanny felt as though she were living at the very heart of the great, bustling, eventful world. When she saw Edmund Robsart, the famous novelist, whose flat was No. 20, go up in the lift, when he said "Good-evening" to her and smiled, he whose picture was quite often in the daily papers, whose books were on the railway bookstalls, whose name was even mentioned once in Fanny's hearing by T. E. Dunville at the Victoria Palace—well, there was something to be proud of. True, he was over fifty, and fat and a little pompous—what did that matter? Fanny had taken messages to him in his rooms and seen him once in a purple silk dressing-gown.

She did not consider herself overworked. She had to be on duty at eight-thirty every morning, and she remained until six-thirty in the evening. She had every Saturday afternoon and every other Sunday. She did every kind of thing in between those hours. The whole warm pulsing life of the twenty chambers seemed to radiate from her. She fancied herself sitting there in her little office, taking the messages from the flats and distributing them to the different valets and servants in the kitchen, watching everyone who came in and out, detecting suspicious people who wanted to see "So-and-so on very urgent business," attending to Mr. Nix when he had anything to say or wanted anything . . . and sometimes in the hot summer weather she would sit and look out upon the white and shining street, feeling the heat play in little gleaming waves upon the green staircase behind her, hearing the newsboys shout their war-news, watching stout Mr. Newbury, of the picture-shop, as he stood in his door-

way and speculated on the weather. How cool here, and how hot out there!—and in the winter how warm the flats and how cold the dusky blue-green street!

She sometimes wondered whether it were not wicked of her to care for her life at Hortons so much when it all came to her from the horrible war, which did indeed seem to her the most dreadful thing that had ever happened.

She had not known many young men, but there had been Mr. Simmons and Mr. Frank Blake and his brother Tom Blake—nice young men, and most amusing in the evening after supper or on an evening out at the Music Hall—all gone. . . . Tom Blake dead, Frank Blake without a leg, Mr. Simmons gassed. . . . Oh, she *hated* this war, she *hated* it—but she loved Hortons.

The fly in the ointment was the old familiar fly of family comment. The war had not had a good effect upon Aggie. She sat at home and grew more and more pessimistic. There never *was* such pessimism. Germany was to Aggie a triumphing, dominating force that nothing could stop. "What's the use of our fighting?" she would say when Fanny would arrive home to supper, exhausted but cheerful. "What's the *use?* That's what I want to know. Here we are at their mercy—can step over any time they like and just take us."

Nothing made Fanny so angry as this. It was all she could do to control herself; nevertheless, control herself she did.

"What about our Army?" she would say. "And the

submarines? What about Kitchener?" and later, "What about Haig?"

"Haig!" sniffed Aggie. "Haig!" The air-raids finished Aggie. A bomb was dropped quite close to their upper-part in Bloomsbury. Aggie was ill for weeks—she recovered, but rose from her bed a soured, injured, vindictive woman. It was exactly as though the whole of the war, and especially the bomb-dropping part of it, had been arranged simply for the annoyance of Aggie Close. She always said that she hated the Germans, but to hear her talk you'd think that she hated the English a great deal more. Our incompetence, our cowardice, our selfishness, our wickedness in high places—such were her eternal topics. Fanny, sitting in her hutch at Hortons, saw the evening waiting for her—the horrible evening with their little stuffy, food-smelling, overcrowded room, with the glazed and grinning sideboard, the pink-and-white wool mats, the heavy lace curtains over the window, the hideous oleographs, the large, staring photographs. Unlike most of her kind she knew that all this was ugly, and in the midst of the ugliness was Aggie, Aggie with her square, short, thick-set figure, her huge flat feet, her heavy, freckled hands. She would have escaped to a place of entertainment had there been anybody to take her—just now there was nobody. She could not walk about the streets alone.

At first she had tried to interest Aggie in the exciting events of her day, in poor Mr. Jay, and magnificent Mr. Robsart, and funny, fussing Mrs. Demaris, and the Hon. Clive. But Aggie had a marvellous way of turn-

ing everything, however cheerful and bright it might seem, into sin and sorrow and decay. If Fanny was happy, it was: "How can you laugh when the world's in the state it's in?" If Fanny sighed, it was: "I should have thought it was one's duty to be as cheerful as possible just now. But some people think only of themselves."

If Fanny argued against some too outrageous piece of pessimism, it was: "Really, Fanny, it's such as you is losing us the war."

"Oh! I hate Aggie!—I hate Aggie!" Fanny would sometimes cry to herself in the heart of her hutch, but she could not summon to herself sufficient resolution to go off and live by herself; she had a terror of solitary evenings, all the terror of one who did not care for books, who was soaked in superstition and loved lights and noise.

During the first two years of the war she did not consider the end of the war. She never doubted for a single moment but that the Allies would win, and for the rest she had too much work to do to waste time in idle speculations. But in the third year that little phrase "after the war" began to drive itself in upon her. Everyone said it. She perceived that people were bearing their trials and misfortunes and losses because "after the war" everything would be all right again—there would be plenty of food and money and rest "after the war."

Her heart began to ache for all the troubles that she saw around her. Mr. Nix lost his boy in France and was a changed man. For a month or two it seemed as

though he would lose all interest in Hortons. He was listless and indifferent and suffered slackness to go unpunished. Then he pulled himself together. Hortons was its old self again—and how Fanny admired him for that!

Then came the Armistice, and the world changed for Fanny. It changed because, in a sudden devastating horrible flash of revelation, she realised that the women would all have to go! The men would come back. . . . And she?

That night when she perceived this gave her one of her worst hours. She had allowed herself—and she saw now how foolish she had been to do so—to look upon the work at Hortons as the permanent occupation of her life. How could she have done otherwise? It suited her so exactly; she loved it, and everybody encouraged her to believe that she did it well. Had not Mr. Nix himself told her that he could not have believed that he could miss the magnificent James so little, and that no man could have filled the blank as she had done? Moreover, in the third year of the war James had been killed, and it would take a new man a long time to learn all the ins-and-outs of the business as she had learnt them. So she had encouraged herself to dream, and the dream and the business had become one—she could not tear them apart. Well, now she must tear them apart. Mr. Nix was dismissing all the women.

With teeth set she faced her future. No use to think of getting another job—everywhere the men were returning. For such work as she could do there would

be a hundred men waiting for every vacancy. No, she would have to live always with Aggie. They would have enough to live on—just enough. Their brother allowed them something, and an aunt had left them a little legacy. Just enough with a perpetual sparing and scraping—no more of the little luxuries that Fanny's pay from Hortons had allowed them. Certainly not enough for either of them to live alone. Tied for ever together, that's what they would be—chained! and Aggie growing ever more and more bitter.

Nevertheless she faced it. She went back to Hortons with a smile and a laugh. Her gentlemen and ladies did not know that she was looking upon them with eyes of farewell. Miss Lois Drake, for instance, that daring and adventurous type of the modern girl about whose future Fanny was always speculating with trembling excitement, she did not notice anything at all. But then she thought of very little save herself. "However she *can* do the things she does!" was Fanny's awed comment—and now, alas, she would never see the climax to her daring—never, never, never!

She said nothing to Aggie of her troubles, and Aggie said nothing to her. The days passed. Then just before Christmas came the marvellous news.

By this time all the girl valets had been dismissed and men had taken their places. They would congregate in the hall of a morning, coming on approval, and Fanny would speculate about them. Mr. Nix even asked her advice. "I like that one," she would say; "I wouldn't trust that man a yard," she would decide. Then one day Albert Edward came. There was no

doubt about him at all. He was almost as good as the late lamented James. Handsome, although short—but Fanny liked the "stocky" kind, and with *such* a laugh! Fanny delighted in his jet black hair cut tight about his head, his smiling black eyes, his round, rosy cheeks. She admired him quite in the abstract. He was far too grand for any personal feeling. . . . At once, when he had been in the place two days, she allotted him to Mrs. Mellish's maid, Annette, *such* a handsome girl, so bold and clever! They were made for one another.

Albert Edward was valet on the second floor; he shared that floor with Bacon. Fanny did not like Bacon, the one mistake she thought that Mr. Nix had made.

Well, just before Christmas the wonderful hour arrived.

"Fanny," said Mr. Nix one evening. "Do you realise that you're the only woman left in a man's job?"

"Yes," said Fanny, her heart beating horribly.

"Well," said Mr. Nix, "you're going to continue to be the only woman unless you've any objection."

"Oh, Mr. Nix," said Fanny, "I'm sure I've always tried——"

"Yes, I know," said Mr. Nix, "that's why I want you to stay—for ever if you like—or at any rate so long as I'm here."

"Oh, Mr. Nix," said Fanny again. Tears were in her eyes; the familiar green staircase, the palm and the grandfather's clock swam before her eyes.

It was Aggie, of course, who killed her happiness almost as soon as it was born.

"And what about the demobilised men?" Aggie had asked with her cold, acid smile. "I should have thought that if there were any jobs going a patriotic girl like you would have been the first to stand aside."

Fanny's heart seemed to leap into the air and then fall—stone dead at her feet. Men! Demobilised men! She had not thought of that. But for the moment the only thing she could see was Aggie's spite—her old, eternal spite. . . . She felt the tears rising. In a moment they would break out.

"You would like to spoil it if you could!" she cried. "Yes, you would. It's what you've always done—spoilt everything. Yes, you have—since we were children. Any little bit of happiness. . . ."

"Happiness!" interrupted Aggie; "that's what you call it? Selfishness! cruel selfishness, that's what some would name it."

"You don't care," cried Fanny, her words now choked with sobs. "You don't care as long as I'm hurt and wounded—that's all you mind! . . . always . . . tried to hurt me . . . always!" The tears had conquered her. She rushed from the room.

She escaped—but she was haunted. It was not because Aggie had said it that she minded—no, she did not care for Aggie—it was because there was truth in what Aggie had said. Fanny was precisely the girl to feel such a charge, as Aggie well knew. All her life her conscience had been her trouble, acute, vivid, lifting its voice when there was no need, never satisfied with the prizes and splendours thrown it. In ordinary

times Fanny surrendered at once to its hideous demands —this time she fought.

Aggie herself helped in the fight. Having succeeded in making Fanny miserable, it was by no means her intention that the silly child should really surrender the job. That did not at all suit her own idle selfishness. So she mocked at her for staying where she was, but made it plain that having given her word, she must stick to it. "You've made your bed and must lie on it," was her phrase.

Fanny said nothing. The light had gone from her eyes, the colour from her cheeks. She was fighting the sternest battle of her life. Everywhere she saw, or fancied she saw, demobilised men. Every man in the street with a little shining disc fastened to his coat was in her eyes a demobilised man starving and hungry because she was so wicked. And yet why should she give it up? She had proved her worth—shown that she was *better* than a man in that particular business. Would Mr. Nix have kept her had she not been better? Kind though he was, he was not a philanthropist. . . . And to give it up, to be tied for life to Aggie, to be idle, to be unwanted, to see no more of Hortons, to see no more—of Albert Edward. Yes, the secret was out. She loved Albert Edward. Not with any thought of herself—dear me, no. . . . She knew that she was far too plain, too dull. She need only compare herself for an instant with Mrs. Mellish's Annette, and she could see where she stood. No, romance was not for her. But she liked his company. He was so kind to her.

He would stand, again and again, in her little hutch and chatter, laughing and making silly jokes.

She amused him, and he admired her capacity for business. "You *are* a one!" was his way of putting it. "You'd be something like running a restaurant—business side, you know."

How proud she was when he said these things! After all, everybody had something. Annette, for all her bows and ribbons, was probably poor at business.

However, she included Albert Edward in the general life of Hortons, and refused to look any closer. So day and night the struggle continued. She could not sleep, she could not eat, everyone told her that she was looking ill and needed a holiday. She was most truly a haunted woman, and her ghosts were on every side of her, pressing in upon her, reproaching her with starving, dark-rimmed eyes. She struggled, she fought, she clung with bleeding hands to the stones and rafters and walls of Hortons.

Conscience had her way—Fanny was beaten. The decision was taken one night after a horrible dream—a dream in which she had been pursued by a menacing, sinister procession of men, some without arms and legs, who floated about her, beating her in the face with their soft boneless hands. . . .

She awoke screaming. Next morning she went to Mr. Nix.

"I'm afraid I must give you my notice, Mr. Nix," she said.

Of course he laughed at her when she offered her reason. But she was firm.

"You've been terribly good to me, Mr. Nix," she said, "but I must go."

She was firm. It was all that she could do not to cry. He submitted, saying that he would leave her a day or so to reconsider it.

She went into her hut and stared in front of her, in stony wretchedness. That was the worst day of her life. She felt like a dead woman. Worst of all was the temptation to run back to Mr. Nix and tell him that it was not true, that she *had* reconsidered it. . . .

All day she saw Aggie in her green stuff dress, her eyes close to the paper, the room so close, so close. . . .

In the afternoon, about five, she felt that she could bear it no longer.

She would get the hall-boy to take her place and would go home.

Albert Edward came in for a chat. She told him what she had done.

"Well," he said, "that's fine."

She stared at him.

"I want you to marry me," he said; "I've been wanting it a long time. I like you. You're just the companion for me, sense of humour and all that. And a business head. I'm past the sentimental stuff. What I want is a pal. What do you say to the little restaurant?"

The grandfather's clock rose up and struck Fanny in the face. She could have endured that had not the green and white staircase done the same. So strange was the world that she was compelled to put her hand on Albert Edward's arm.

Behind the swimming, dazzling splendour of her happiness was the knowledge that she had secured a job from which no man in the world would have the right to oust her.

III

THE HON. CLIVE TORBY

HE was now the only son of old Lord Dronda; his elder brother had been killed at Mons early in the war. He had been aware of his good looks ever since he was a week old. Tom, the elder brother, had been fat and plain; everyone had told him so. He did not mind now, being dead. Clive was the happiest fellow possible, even though he had lost an arm late in '17. He had not minded that. It was his left arm, and he could already do almost everything quite well without it; women liked him all the better for having lost it. He had always been perfectly satisfied with himself, his looks, his home, his relations—everything. His critics said that he was completely selfish, and had horrible manners or no manners at all, but it was difficult to underline his happy unconscious young innocence so heavily. Certainly if, in the days before the war, you stayed with his people, you found his indifference to your personal needs rather galling—but "Tom looked after all that," although Tom often did not because he was absent-minded by nature and fond of fishing. The fact is that poor Lady Dronda was to blame. She had educated her children very badly, being so fond of them and so proud of them that she gave in to them on every opportunity. She was known amongst her friends

as "Poor Lady Dronda" because, being a sentimentalist and rather stupid, life was perpetually disappointing her. People never came up to her expectations, so she put all her future into the hands of her sons, who, it seemed, might in the end also prove disappointing. The favourite word on her lips was, "Now tell me the truth. The one thing I want to hear from my friends is the truth." However, the truth was exactly what she never did get, because it upset her so seriously and made her so angry with the person who gave it her. Tom being dead, she transformed him into an angel, and told sympathetic acquaintances so often that she never spoke of him that his name was rarely off her lips. Nevertheless she was able to devote a great deal of her time to Clive, who was now "All Her Life."

The results of this were two: first, that Clive, although retaining all his original simple charm, was more sure than ever before that he was perfect; secondly, that he found his mother tiresome and, having been brought up to think of nobody but himself, was naturally as little at home as possible.

He took up his abode at Hortons, finding a little flat, No. 11, on the second floor, that suited him exactly. Into it he put his "few sticks of things," and the result was a charming confusion of soda-water syphons and silver photograph frames.

He very happily throughout the whole of 1918 resided there, receiving innumerable young women to meals of different kinds, throwing the rooms open to all his male acquaintances, and generally turning night into day—with the caution that he must not annoy

Mr. Nix, the manager, for whom he had the very greatest respect. The odd thing was that with all his conceit and bad manners, he was something of a hero. He had received both the M.C. and the D.S.O., and was as good an officer as the Guards could boast. This sounds conventional and in the good old Ouida tradition, but his heroism lay rather in the fact that he had positively loathed the war. He hated the dirt, the blood, the confusion, the losing of friends, what he called "the general Hell." No one was more amusing and amiable during his stay out there, and, to be Ouidaesque again for a moment, he was adored by his men.

Nevertheless it was perhaps the happiest moment of his life when he knew he was to lose his arm. "No more going back to jolly old France for me, old bean," he wrote to a friend. "Now I'm going to enjoy myself."

That was his rooted determination. He had not gone through all that and been maimed for life for nothing. He was going to enjoy himself. Yes, after the war he would show them. . . .

He showed them mainly at present by dancing all hours of the day and night. He had danced before the war like any other human being, and had faithfully attended at Murray's and the Four Hundred and the other places. But he did not know that he had very greatly enjoyed it; he had gone in the main because Miss Poppy Darling, who had just then caught his attention, commanded him to do so. Now it was quite another matter—he went simply for the dance itself. He was not by nature a very introspective young man,

and he did not think of himself as strange or odd or indeed as anything definite at all; but it was perhaps a little strange that he, who had been so carefully brought up by his fond mother, should surrender to a passion for tom-toms and tin kettles more completely than he had ever surrendered to any woman. He did not care with whom it was that he danced; a man would have done as well. The point was that, when those harsh and jarring noises began to beat and battle through the air, his body should move and gyrate in sympathy just as at that very moment perhaps, somewhere in Central Africa, a grim and glistening savage was turning monotonously beneath the glories of a full moon. He danced all night and most of the day, with the result that he had very little time for anything else. Lady Dronda complained that he never wrote to her. "Dear Mother," he replied on a postcard, "jolly busy. Ever so much to do. See you soon."

Young men and young women came to luncheon and dinner. He was happy and merry with them all. Even Fanny, the portress downstairs, adored him. His smile was irresistible.

The strangest fact of all, perhaps, was that the war had really taught him nothing. He had for three years been face to face with Reality, stared into her eyes, studied her features, seeing her for quite the first time.

And his vision of her had made no difference to him at all. He came back into this false world to find it just exactly as he had left it. Reality slipped away from him, and it was as though she had never been. He was as sure as he had been four years before that

the world was made only for him and his—and not so much for his as for him. Had you asked he would not have told you, because he was an Englishman and didn't think it decent to boast—but you would have seen it in his eyes that he really did believe that he was vastly superior to more than three-quarters of the rest of humanity—and this although he had gone to Eton and had received therefore no education, although he knew no foreign language, knew nothing about the literature of his own or any other country, was trained for no business and no profession, and could only spell with a good deal of hit-and-miss result.

Moreover, when you faced him and thought of these things, you yourself were not sure whether, after all, he were not right. He was so handsome, so self-confident, so fearless, so touching with his youth and his armless sleeve, that you could not but wonder whether the world, after all, was not made for such as he. The old world perhaps—but the new one? . . .

Meanwhile Clive danced.

He flung himself into such an atmosphere of dancing that he seemed to dance all his relations and acquaintances into it with him. He could not believe that everyone was not spending the time in dancing. Albert Edward, whose official name was Banks, assured him that he had no time for dancing.

"No time!" said Clive, greatly concerned. "Poor devil! I don't know how you get along."

Albert Edward, who approved of the Hon. Clive because of his pluck, his birth, his good looks, and his generosity, only smiled.

"Got to earn my living, sir," he said.

"Really, must you?" Clive was concerned. "Well, it's a damned shame after all you've done over there."

"Someone's got to work still, I suppose, sir," said Albert Edward; "and it's my belief that it's them that works hardest now will reap the 'arvest soonest—that's my belief."

"Really!" said Clive in politely interested tone. "Well, Banks, if you want to know my idea, it is that it's about time that some of us enjoyed ourselves—after all we've been through. Let the old un's who've stayed at home do the work."

"Yes, sir," said Albert Edward.

It did indeed seem a shame to Clive that anyone should have to work at all—that nice girl Fanny, for instance, who was portress downstairs, or that poor old decrepit-looking thing who was night-porter and opened the door for Clive at four in the morning.

He told Fanny what he thought. Fanny laughed. "I love my work, sir," she said; "I wouldn't be without it for anything."

"Wouldn't you really, now?" said Clive, staring at her.

Dimly he perceived that these months after the Armistice and during the early months of 1919 were a queer time—no one seemed to know what was going to happen. The state of the world was very uncomfortable did one look into it too closely; even into the chaste and decorous quarter of St. James's rumours of impending revolution penetrated. People were unhappy —had not enough to eat, had no roof over their heads,

always one thing or another. The papers were beastly, so Clive gave up looking at them, save only the *Sporting Times,* and devoted his hours that were saved from dancing to a little gentle betting, to wondering whether Joe Beckett would beat Goddard, and when he had beaten him to wondering whether he would beat Georges Carpentier, and to playing a rubber or two of auction bridge at White's, and to entertaining the ladies and gentlemen already mentioned.

He was not, during this period, worrying at all about money. He very seldom saw his old father, who never came up to town and never wrote letters. Old Lord Dronda, who was now nearly seventy, stayed at the place in Hertfordshire—he loved cows and pigs and horses, and Clive imagined him perfectly happy in the midst of these animals.

He had an ample allowance, but was compelled to reinforce it by writing cheques on his mother's account. She had, when he lost his arm, given him an open cheque-book on her bank. There was nothing too good for such a hero. He did not naturally think about money, he did not like to be bothered about it, but he was vaguely rather proud of himself for keeping out of the money-lenders' hands and not gambling more deeply at bridge. Luckily, dancing left one little time for that —"Keeps me out of mischief, jazzing does," he told his friends. He had, in his room, a photograph of his father—an old photograph, but like the old man still. Lord Dronda was squarely built and had side-whiskers and pepper-and-salt trousers. He looked like a prosperous farmer. His thighs were thick, his nose square,

and he wore a billycock a little on one side of his head. Clive had not seen his father for so long a time that it gave him quite a shock to come in one afternoon and find the old man sitting under his photograph, a thick stick in his hand and large gaiters above his enormous boots. He was looking about him with a lost and bewildered air and sitting on the very edge of the sofa. His grey bowler was on the back of his head.

"Hullo, Guv'nor!" Clive cried. Clive was a little bewildered at the sight of the old man. His plan had been a nap before dressing for dinner. He had been dancing until six that morning, and was naturally tired, but he was a kindly man, and therefore nice to his father.

"I'm delighted to see you!" he said. "But whatever are you doing up here?"

The old man was not apparently greatly delighted to see Clive. He was lost and bewildered, and seemed to have trouble in finding his words. He stammered and looked helplessly about him.

His son asked him whether he'd have any tea. No, he wouldn't have any tea—no, nothing at all.

"The fact is," he brought out at last, "that Dronda's to be sold, and I thought you ought to know."

Dronda to be sold! The words switched back before Clive's eyes that figure of Reality that recently he had forgotten. Dronda to be sold! He saw his own youth coloured with the green of the lawns, the silver of the lake, the deep red brick of the old house. Dronda to be sold!

"But that's impossible, father!" he cried.

He found, however, that a great deal more than that was possible. He had never possessed, as he had been used sometimes proudly to boast, a very good head for figures, and the old man had not a great talent for making things clear, but the final point was that the Income Tax and the general increased expenses of living had made Dronda impossible.

"Also, my boy," Lord Dronda added, "all the money you've been spending lately—your mother only confessed to me last week. You'll have to get some work and settle down at it. I'm sorry, but the old days are gone."

I'm quite aware that this is not a very original story. On how many occasions in how many novels has the young heir to the entails been suddenly faced with poverty and been compelled to sit down and work? Nine times out of ten most nobly has he done it, and ten times out of ten he has won the girl of his heart by so doing.

The only novelty here is the moment of the catastrophe. Here was the very period towards which, through years and years of discomfort and horror in France, young Clive had been looking. "After the war he would have the time of his life"; "after the war" had arrived and Dronda was to be sold! His first impulse was to abuse fate generally and his father in particular. One glance at the old man checked that. How funny he looked, sitting there on the edge of the sofa, his thick stick between his knees, his hat tilted back, and that air of bewildered perplexity on his round face as of a baby confronted with his first thunder-storm. His thick-set, rather stout body, his

side-whiskers, his rough red hands—all seemed to remove him completely from the smart, slim, dark young man who sat opposite him. Nevertheless Clive felt the bond. He was suddenly in unison with his father as he had never been, in all his life, with his mother. His father and he had never had what one would call a "heart-to-heart" conversation in their lives—they did not have one now. They would have been bitterly distressed at such an idea. All Clive said was:

"What a bore! I didn't know things were like that. You ought to have told me."

To which Dronda replied, his eyes wistfully on his son's empty sleeve:

"I didn't think it would get so bad. You'll have to find some work. No need for us to bother your mother about it."

The old man got up to go. His eyes moved uncomfortably from one photograph to another. He pulled at his high collar as though he felt the room close.

"Sure you won't have anything?" said Clive.

"No, thanks," said his father.

"Well, don't you worry. I'll get some work all right. I'll have to pull my horns in a bit, though."

And that was positively all that was said. Dronda went away, that puzzled, bewildered look still hovering between his mouth and his eyes, his grey bowler still a little to one side.

After he was gone Clive considered the matter. Once the first shock was over things were really not so bad. The loss of Dronda was horrible, of course, and Clive thought of that as little as might be, but even

there the war had made a difference, having shaken everything, in its tempestuous course, to the ground, so that one looked on nothing now as permanent. As to work, Clive would not mind that at all. There was quite a number of things that he would like to do. There were all these new Ministries, for instance; he thought of various friends that he had. He wrote down the names of one or two. Or there was the City. He had often fancied that he would like to go into the City. You made money there, he understood, in simply no time at all. And you needed no education. . . . He thought of one or two City men whom he knew and wrote down their names.

One or two other things occurred to him. Before he went out to dine he had written a dozen notes. He liked to think that he could be prompt and business-like when there was need.

During the next day or two he had quite a merry time with his friends about the affair. He laughingly depicted himself as a serious man of business, one of those men whom you see in the cinemas, men who sit at enormous desks and have big fists and Rolls-Royces. He spent one especially jolly evening, first at Claridge's, then "As you Were" at the Pavilion (Sir Billion de Boost was what *he* would shortly be, he told his laughing companion), then dancing. Oh, a delightful evening! "My last kick!" he called it; and looking back afterwards, he found that he had spoken more truly than he knew.

His friends answered his notes and asked him to go and see them. He went. There then began a very

strange period of discovery. First he went to the Labour Ministry and saw his old friend Reggie Burr.

Reggie looked most official in his room with his telephone and things. Clive told him so. Reggie smiled, but said that he was pressed for time and would Clive just mind telling him what it was he wanted. Clive found it harder to tell him than he had expected. He was modest and uneloquent about his time in France, and after that there really was not very much to say. What had he done? What could he do? . . . Well, not very much. He laughed. "I'm sure I'd fit into something," he said.

"I'll let you know if there *is* anything," said Reggie Burr.

And so it went on. It was *too* strange how definite these men wanted him to be! As the days passed Clive had the impression that the world was getting larger and larger and emptier and emptier. It seemed as though he could not touch boundaries nor horizons. . . . It was a new world, and he had no place in it. . . .

The dancing suddenly receded, or rather was pushed and huddled back, as the nurse in old days took one's toys and crammed them into a corner. Clive found it no longer amusing. He was puzzled, and dancing did not help him to any discovery. He found that he had nothing to say to his friends on these occasions. He was aware that they were saying behind his back: "What's come to Clive Toby? . . . Dull as ditchwater."

He went about with a bemused, blinded expression. He was seeing himself for the first time. Hortons and everything in it had quite a new life for him: Mr.

Nix, Fanny, Albert Edward—all these people were earning their living and earning it much more efficiently than he seemed to be able to do. All the time behind them seemed to stand that wistful figure of his father. "I'd like to do something for the old man," he thought.

Down in the City his experiences were very strange. The first three men whom he saw were very polite and jolly, and said "they'd let him know if anything turned up." They asked him what business experience he had had, and then how much money he was prepared to put into a "concern"; and when he had answered them with a jolly laugh and said that he had had no experience, but had no doubt that he "would shake down all right," and that he had no money, but "really would take his coat off and work," they smiled, and said that "things were bad in the City just now, but they would let him know."

They all liked him, he felt, and he liked them, and that was as far as it went. But his experience with his fourth friend was different. Sir James Maradick, Bart, could scarcely be called a friend of his. He had met him once at someone's house; Reggie Burr had given him a note to him. He was a big broad man somewhere near sixty, and he was as nice to Clive as possible, but he didn't mince matters.

He had been given his Baronetcy for some fine organising work that he had done in the war. Clive, who did not think much about men as a rule, liked him better than any man he'd ever met. "This fellow would do for me," he thought.

The question, however, was whether Clive would do for Maradick.

"What have you done?" Maradick asked.

"H'm. Eton and Oxford. . . . And what kind of job are you looking for?"

Clive modestly explained—somewhere about six hundred a year. He wanted to help the governor through a stiff time.

Maradick smiled. That was very nice. Would Clive mind Maradick speaking quite plainly? Not at all. That was what Clive wanted.

Maradick then said that it was like a fairy-tale. He had had, during the last fortnight, four fellows who wanted jobs at anything from five hundred to a thousand a year. All of them very modest. Hadn't had any experience, but thought they could drop into it. All of them done well in the war. All of them wanted to keep their parents . . . very creditable.

But there was another side to the question. Did Clive know that there were hundreds of men ready to come in at three hundred a year and less, men who had been in the City since nine years old, men who had the whole thing at their fingers' ends . . . hundreds of them . . . ?

"The world was made for you boys before the war. You won't think me rude, will you? You went to Eton and Oxford and learnt nothing at all, and then waited for things to tumble into your hands. That's why commercial Germany beat us all round the world. Well, it won't be so any longer. The new world isn't

made for you boys. You've got to win your way into it."

"You're quite right," Clive blushed. "Thank you very much."

Maradick looked at him, and his heart warmed to him.

"Take my tip and do a working-man's job. What about house-painting, for instance, or driving a taxi? They're getting big money. Just for a bit—to try your hand."

"Not a bad idea," said Clive. They shook hands in a most friendly fashion. Maradick spoke to his partner (at lunch) about him. "Nice boy," he said. "We'll have him in here later."

Clive went back to Hortons and met there the temptation of his life in the shape of his mother.

She was looking lovely in grey silk, Parma violets, and a little black hat. She was in one of her most sentimental moods. She cried a good deal and asked Clive what he intended to do. When she asked him that, what she really wanted was that he should say that he loved her. This he did in a hurried fashion, because he wanted to tell her about Maradick. She had, however, her own things that she wanted to say, and these were, in the main, that he was "her all," that it was too awful about Dronda, that John (Lord Dronda) had simply been losing thousands over his stupid old agriculture, and, finally, that she had money of her own on which dear Clive should live to the end of his days. All this nonsense about his working, as though he hadn't

done enough already with his poor arm and everything. They should go away together and have a lovely time.

Clive was tempted. For ten minutes there raged a fierce battle. He knew that what she said could be true enough. That they could go away together and spend money together, and that she would give him everything that she had, and only want him in return to say over and over again that he loved her. They would wander about, and probably he would find some rich girl who would marry him, and then he would live on her. . . .

While he thought this out, words poured from his mother's lips in tattered confusion. No words used by his mother ever meant what she intended them to mean. Nevertheless, the last question held the substance of them all. "And you do really love me, Clive boy, don't you?"

The "Clive boy" really settled it, although I hope and believe that it would have been settled without that. But he could not wander about Europe as "Clive boy." . . .

So he said: "Thanks, mother. You're a brick, wantin' me to have everything and all that. But I really won't. I'm going to settle down and work."

"Whatever at, you poor foolish darling?" asked his mother.

"At anything I can get," he replied.

She left him at last, having cried just enough to show her real emotion without damaging her unreal complexion. Her Parma violets were also intact.

He was an unkind, ungrateful son, and her heart was

broken, but at the same time he was "her all," and would he lunch with her to-morrow at Claridge's?

This he said that he would do. "My last good meal," he murmured to himself rather histrionically.

His mother departed.

He had a bad quarter of an hour after she had gone. The sacred precincts of Hortons contained at least one honest soul that afternoon. He saw himself exactly as he was—spoilt, useless, idle, and conceited. He swore to himself that he would find work of some kind before the day was done.

He went out. It was a lovely afternoon early in May. Mr. Bottome, the newsagent, had fine copies of *Colour* showing in his window, the top of Duke Street gazed straight into the huge naked-looking statue of a horse in the courtyard of the Academy. Everything seemed to be having a spring cleaning.

He turned back and down into Jermyn Street. Next to the Hamman Baths they were painting a house light green. A nice young fellow in overalls stepped off a ladder as Clive passed.

He smiled at Clive. Clive smiled back.

"Is that an easy job?" Clive asked him.

"Oh yes, sir," the young fellow answered.

"Could you manage it with one arm?" Clive asked.

"Why, yes," the man said.

"Could I pick it up quickly?"

"Lord, yes!"

"Will you teach me?"

* * * * * * *

A week later Mr. Nix, in a hurry as usual, was pattering up Duke Street. Bottome's paper shop was having a new coat of paint. A young workman in yellow overalls perched on a ladder managed his brush adroitly with one arm.

"Poor fellow!" said Mr. Nix, a compassionate man always, but doubly so now because he had lost his son in the war. "Left the other in France, I suppose."

The workman looked down, and revealed to the astonished countenance of Mr. Nix the laughing eyes of his late tenant, the Hon. Clive Torby.

IV

MISS MORGANHURST

IT may be that in future years when critics and commentators look back upon the European War, one of the aspects of it that will seem to them strangest will be the attitude of complete indifference that certain people assumed during the course of it. Indifference! That is an inefficient word. It is not too strong to say that hundreds of men and women in London during those horrible years were completely unconscious, save on the rare occasions when rationing or air-raids forced them to attend, that there was any war at all. There were men in clubs, women in drawing-rooms . . . old maids and old bachelors . . . old maids like Miss Morganhurst.

How old Miss Morganhurst really was, for how long she had been raising her lorgnette to gaze scornfully at Society, for how many years now she had been sitting down to bridge on fine sunny afternoons with women like Anne Carteledge and Mrs. Mellish and Mrs. Porter, for how many more years she had lived in No. 30 flat at Hortons, she alone had the secret—even Agatha, her sour and confidential maid, could not tell.

No one knew whence she came; years ago some young wag had christened her the "Morgue," led to that diminutive by the strange pallor of her cheeks, the queer

bone-cracking little body she had and her fashion of dressing herself up in jewellery and bright colours that gave her a certain sort of ghastliness. She had been for years an intimate of all sorts of sets in London: no one could call her a snob—she went just everywhere, and knew just everyone; she was after two things in life—scandal and bridge—and whether it were the old Duchess of Wrexe's drawing-room (without the Duchess of course) or the cheapest sort of provincial tea-party, she was equally at home and satisfied. She was like a ferret with her beady eyes—a dressed-up ferret. Yes, and like the "Morgue" too, a sniff of corruption about her somewhere.

People had said for many years that she was the best bridge-player in London, and that she lived by her winnings. That was, I daresay, true enough. Her pale face looked as though it fed on artificial light, and her over-decorated back was always bent a little, as though she were for ever stooping over a table.

I've seen her play bridge, and it's not a sight one's likely to forget—bent almost double, her hooky fingers of a dull yellow loaded with rings pointing towards some card and her eyes literally flashing fire. Lord! how these women played! Life and death to them truly . . . no gentle card-game for *them*. She was a woman who hated sentiment; her voice was hard and dry, with a rasp in it like the movement of an ill-fitting gate. She boasted that she cared for no human being alive, she did not believe in human affection. Her maid, Agatha, she said, would cut her throat for twopence; but, expect-

ing to be left something in the will, stayed on savagely hoping.

It is hard, however, for even the dryest of human souls to be attached to nothing. Miss Morganhurst had her attachment—to a canine, fragment of skin and bone known as Tiny-Tee. Tiny-Tee was so small that it could not have been said to exist had not its perpetual misery given it a kind of spasmodic loveliness. It is the nature of these dogs to shiver and shake and tremble, but nothing ever lived up to its nature more thoroughly than Tiny-Tee. Miss Morganhurst (in her own fierce rasping way) adored this creature. It never left her, and sat on her lap during bridge shuddering and shivering amongst a multitude of little gold chains and keys and purses that jangled and rattled with every shiver.

Then came the war, and it shook the world to pieces. It did not shake Miss Morganhurst.

For one bad moment she fancied that bridge would be difficult and that it might not be easy to provide Tiny-Tee with her proper biscuits. She consulted with Mrs. Mellish and Mrs. Porter, and after looking at the thing from every side they were of opinion that it would be possible still to find a "four." She further summoned up Mr. Nix from the "vasty deeps" of the chambers and endeavoured to probe his mind. This she did easily, and Mr. Nix became quite confidential. He thoroughly approved of Miss Morganhurst, partly because she knew such very grand people, which was good for his chambers, and partly because Miss Morganhurst had no kind of morals and you could say anything you liked. Mr. Nix was a kindly little man and

a diplomatic, and he suited himself to his company; but he did like sometimes to be quite unbuttoned and not to have "to think of every word."

With Miss Morganhurst you needn't think of anything. She found his love of gossip very agreeable indeed; she approved, too, of his honourable code. You were safe with him. Not a thing would he ever give away about any other inhabitant of Hortons. She asked him about the food for Tiny-Tee, and he assured her that he would do his best. And the little dinners for four? . . . She need not be anxious.

After which she dismissed the war altogether from her mind. It would, of course, emphasise its more unagreeable features in the paper. That was unfortunate. But very soon the press cleverly discovered a kind of camouflage of phrase which covered up reality completely. "The honourable gentleman, speaking at Newcastle last night, said that we would not sheathe the sword until——" "Over the top! those are the words for which our brave lads are waiting——" "Our offensive in these areas inflicted very heavy losses on the Germans and resulted in the capture of important positions by the Allied troops."

It seemed that Miss Morganhurst read these phrases for a week or two, and easily persuaded herself that the war was non-existent. She was happy that it was so. It apears incredible that anyone could have dismissed the war so easily, but then Miss Morganhurst was surely impenetrable.

I have heard different explanations given by people, who knew her well, of Miss Morganhurst's impenetra-

bility. Some said that it was a mask, assumed to cover and defeat feelings that were dangerous to liberate; others, that she was so selfish and egoistic that she really did not care about anybody. This is the interesting point about Miss Morganhurst. Did she banish the war entirely from her consciousness and give it no further consideration, or was she, in truth, desperately and with ever-increasing terror aware of it and unable to resist it?

She gave no sign until the very end; but the nature of that end leads me to believe that the first of the two theories is the correct one. People who knew her have said that her devotion to that wretched little canine remnant proves that she had no heart, but only a fluent sentimentality. I believe it to have proved exactly the opposite. I believe her to have been the cynic she was because she had, at some time or other, been deeply disappointed. She had, I imagine, no illusions about herself, and saw that the only thing to be, if she were to fight at all, was ruthless, harsh, money-grubbing, and, above all, to bury herself in other people's scandal. She was, I rather fancy, one of those women for whom life would have been completely changed, had she been given beauty or even moderate good looks. As life had not given her that, she would pay it back. And after all, life was stronger than she knew. . . .

She did not refuse to discuss the war, but she spoke of it as of something remotely distant, playing itself out in the sands of the Sahara, for instance. Nothing stirred her cynical humour more deeply than the heroics on both sides. When politicians or kings or generals

got up and said before all the world how just their cause was and how keen they were about honour and truth and self-sacrifice, and how certain they were, after all, to win, Miss Morganhurst gave her sinister villainous chuckle.

She became something of a power during the bad years, when the air-raids came and the casualties mounted higher and higher, and Roumania came in only to break, and the Russian revolution led to the sinister ghoulishness of Brest-Litovsk. People sought her company. "We'll go and see the 'Morgue,'" they said; "she never mentions the war." She never did; she refused absolutely to consider it. She would not even discuss prices and raids and ration-books. Private history was what she cared for, and that generally on the scabious side, if possible. What she liked to know was who was sick of her, why so-and-so had left such-and-such a place, whether X—— was really drinking, and why Z—— had taken to cocaine. Her bridge got better and better, and it used to be a real trial of strength to go and play with her in the untidy, overfull, over-garish little flat. The arrival of the Armistice was, I believe now, her first dangerous moment. She was suddenly forced to pause and consider; it was not so easy to shut her eyes and ears as it had been, and the things that she had, against her will, seen and heard were now, in the new silence, insistent. She suddenly, as I remember noticing about this time, got to look incredibly old.

Her nose seemed longer, her chin hookier, her hands

bonier, and little brown spots like sickly freckles appeared on her forehead.

Her dress got brighter and brighter. She especially affected a kind of purple silk, I remember.

The Armistice seemed to disappoint her. It would have done us people a lot of good to get a thorough trouncing, I remember her saying. What would have happened to herself, and her bridge, had we had that trouncing I don't think she reflected. So far as one could see, she regarded herself as an inevitable permanency. I wonder whether she really did. She developed, too, just about this time, an increased passion for her wretched little dog. It was as though, now that the war was really nearing its close, she was twice as frightened about that animal's safety as she had been before? Of what was she afraid? Was it some ghostly warning? Was it some sense that she had that fate was surely going to get her somewhere, and that now that it had missed her through air-raids it must try other means? Or was it simply that she had more time now to spend over the animal's wants and desires? In any case she would not let the dog out of her sight unless on some most imperative occasion. She trusted Agatha, but no one would take so much care as one would oneself. The dog itself seemed now to be restless and alarmed as though it smelt already its approaching doom. It got, so far as one could see, no pleasure from anything. There were no signs that it loved its mistress, only it did perhaps have a sense that she could protect it from outside disaster. Every step, every word, every breath of wind seemed to drive its

little soul to the very edge of extinction—then, with shudderings and shiverings and tremblings, back it came again. They were a grim pair, those two.

Christmas came and passed, and the world began to shake itself together again. That same shaking was a difficult business, attended with strikes and revolutions and murder and despair; but out of the chaos prophets might discern a form slowly rising, a shape that would stand for a new world, for a better world, a kindlier, a cleaner, honester. . . .

But Miss Morganhurst was no prophet. Her sallow eyes were intent on her bridge-cards—so, at least, they appeared to be.

After the catastrophe, I talked with only one person who seemed to have expected what actually occurred. This was a funny old thing called Miss Williams, one of Miss Morganhurst's more shabby friends—a gossip and a sentimentalist—the last person in the world, as I would have supposed, to see anything interesting.

However, this old lady insisted that she had perceived, during this period, that Miss Morganhurst was "keeping something back."

"Keeping what back?" I asked. "A guilty secret?"

"Oh, not at all," said Miss Williams. "Dear me, no. Dahlia wouldn't have minded anything of that kind. No, it's my belief she was affected by the war long before any of us supposed it, and that she wouldn't think of it or look at it because she knew what would happen if she did. She knew, too, that she was being haunted by it all the time, and that it was all piling up, ready,

waiting for the moment. . . . I do hope you don't think me fantastical——"

I didn't think her "fantastical" at all, but I must confess that when I look back I can see in the Miss Morganhurst of these months nothing but a colossal egotism and greed.

However, I must not be cruel. It was towards the end of April that fate, suddenly tired of waiting, took her in hand, and finished her off.

One afternoon when, arrayed in a bright pink tea-gown, she was lying on her sofa, taking some rest before dressing for dinner, Agatha came in and said that her brother was there and would like to see her. Now Miss Morganhurst had a very surprising brother—surprising, that is, for her. He was a clergyman who had been for very many years the rector of a little parish in Wiltshire. So little a parish was it that it gave him little work and less pay, with the result that he was, at his advanced age, shabby and moth-eaten and dim, like a poor old bird shut up for many months in a blinded cage and let suddenly into the light. I don't know what Miss Morganhurst's dealings with her brother had been, whether she had been kind to him or unkind, selfish or unselfish; but I suspect that she had not seen very much of him. Their ways had been too different, their ambitions too separate. The old man had had one passion in his life, his son, and the boy had died in a German prison in the summer of 1918. He had been, it was gathered, in one of the more unpleasant German prisons. Mr. Morganhurst was a widower, and this blow had simply finished him—the thread that

connected him with coherent life snapped, and he lived in a world of dim visions and incoherent dreams.

He was not, in fact, quite right in his head.

Agatha must have thought the couple a strange and depressing pair as they stood together in that becoloured and becrowded room, if, that is to say, she ever thought of anything but herself. Poor old Morganhurst was wearing an overcoat really green with age, and his squashy black hat was dusty and unbrushed.

He wore large spectacles, and his chin was of the kind that seems always to have two days' growth upon it. The bottoms of his trousers were muddy, although it was a dry day. He stood there uneasily twisting his hat round and round in his fingers and blinking at his sister.

"Sit down, Frederick," said his sister. "What can I do for you?"

It seemed that he had come simply to talk to her. He was going down to Little Roseberry that evening, but he had an hour to spare. The fact was that he was besieged, invaded, devastated by horrors of which he could not rid himself.

If he gave them to someone else might they not leave him? At any rate he would share them—he would share them with his sister. It appeared that an officer, liberated from Germany after the Armistice, had sought him out and given him some last details about his son's death.

These "details" were not nice. There are, as we all know, German prisons and German prisons. Young Morganhurst seemed to have been sent to one of the

poorer sort. He had been rebellious and had been punished; he had been starved, shut up for days in solitary darkness . . . at the end he had found a knife somewhere and had killed himself.

The old man's mind was like a haystack, and many details lost their way in the general confusion. He told what he could to his sister. It must have been a strange meeting: the shabby old man sitting in one of those gaudy chairs trying to rid himself of his horror and terror and, above all, of his loneliness. Here was the only relation, the only link, the only hope of something human to comfort him in his darkness; and he did not know her, could not see how to appeal to her or to touch her . . . she was as strange to him as a bird of paradise. She on her side, as I now can see, had her own horror to fight. Here at last was the thing that throughout the war she had struggled to keep away from her. She knew, and she alone, how susceptible she was! But she could not turn him away; he was her brother, and she hated him for coming—shabby old man—but she must hear him out.

She sat there, the dog clutched, shivering to her skinny breast. I don't suppose that she said very much, but she listened. Against her will she listened, and it must have been with her as it is with some traveller when, in the distance, he hears the rushing of the ayalanche that threatens to overwhelm him. But she didn't close her ears. From what she said afterwards one knows that she must have heard everything that he said.

He very quickly, I expect, forgot that he had an au-

dience at all. The words poured out. There was some German officer who had been described to him and he had grown, in his mind, to be the very devil himself. He was a brute, I daresay, but there are brutes in every country. . . .

"He had done simply nothing—just spoken back when they insulted him. They took his clothes off him —everything. He was quite naked. And they mocked him like that, pricking him with their swords. . . . They put him into darkness . . . a filthy place, no sanitation, nothing. . . . They twisted his arms. They made him imagine things, horrible things. When he had dysentery they just left him. . . . They made him drink . . . forced it down his throat. . . ."

How much of it was true? Very little, I daresay. Even as the old man told it details gathered and piled up. "He had always been such a good boy. Very gentle and quiet—never any trouble at school. . . . I was hoping that he would be ordained, as you know, Dahlia. He always loved life . . . one of the happiest boys. What did they do it for? He hadn't done them any harm. They must have made him very angry for him to say what he did—and he didn't say very much. . . . And he was all alone. He hadn't any of his friends with him. And they kept his parcels and letters from him. I'd just sent him one or two little things. . . ."

This, more than anything else, distressed the old man: that they'd kept the letters from the boy. It was the loneliness that seemed to him the most horrible of all.

"He had always hated to be alone. Even as a very

little boy he didn't like to be left in the dark. He used to beg us. . . . Night-lights, we always left night-lights in his room. . . . But what had he done? Nothing. He had never been a bad boy. There was nothing to punish him for."

The old man didn't cry. He sniffed and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, and once he brought out a dirty handkerchief. The thing that he couldn't understand was why this had happened to the boy at all. Also he was persecuted by the thought that there was something still that he could do. He didn't know what it might be, but there must be something. He had no vindictiveness. He didn't want revenge. He didn't blame the Germans. He didn't blame anybody. He only felt that he should "make it up to his boy" somehow. "You know, Dahlia," he said, "there were times when one was irritated by the boy. I haven't a very equable temper. No, I never have had. I used to have my headaches, and he was noisy sometimes. And I'm afraid I spoke sharply. I'm sorry enough for it now—indeed, I am. Oh, yes! But, of course, one didn't know at the time. . . ."

Then he went back to the horrors. They would not leave him, they buzzed about his brain like flies. The darkness, the smell . . . the smell, the filth, the darkness. And then the end! He could not forget that. What the boy must have suffered to come to that! Such a happy boy! . . . Why had it happened? And what was to be done now?

He stopped at last and said that he must go and catch his train. He was glad to have talked about it. It had

done him good. It was kindly of Dahlia to listen to him. He hoped that Dahlia would come down one day and see him at Little Roseberry. It wasn't much that he could offer her. It was a quiet little place, and he was alone, but he would be glad to see her. He kissed her, gave her a dim bewildered smile, and went.

Soon after his departure Mrs. Mellish arrived. It is significant of Mrs. Mellish's general egotism and ignorance that she perceived nothing odd in Miss Morganhurst! Just the same as she always was. They talked bridge the next afternoon. Bridge. Four women. What about Norah Pope? Poor player. That's the worst of it. Doesn't see properly and won't wear glases. Simply conceit. But still, who else is there? Tomorrow afternoon. Very difficult. Mrs. Mellish admits that on that particular day she was preoccupied about a dress that she couldn't get back from the dressmakers. These days. What has come to the working-classes? They don't care. THEY DON'T CARE. Money simply of no importance to them. That's the strange thing. In the old days you could have done simply everything by offering them a little more. . . . But not now. Oh, dear no! . . . She admits that she was preoccupied about the dress, and wasn't noticing Dahlia Morganhurst as she might have done. She saw nothing odd. It's my belief that she'll see nothing odd at the last trump. She went away.

Agatha is the other witness. After Mrs. Mellish's departure she came in to her mistress. The only thing that she remarked about her was that "she was very quiet." Tired, I supposed, after talking to that Mrs.

Mellish. And then her old brother and all. Enough to upset anyone.

Miss Morganhurst sat on the edge of her gaudy sofa looking in front of her. When Agatha came in she said that she would not dress just yet. Agatha had better take the dog out for a quarter of an hour. The maid wondered at that because that was a thing that she was never allowed to do. She hated the animal. However, she pushed its monstrous little head inside its absurd little muzzle, put on her hat and went out.

I don't know what Miss Morganhurst thought about during that quarter of an hour, but when at the end of that time Agatha returned, scared out of her life with the dog dead in her arms, the old lady was sitting in the same spot as before. She can't have moved. She must have been fighting, I fancy, against the last barrier—the last barrier that kept all the wild beasts back from leaping on her imagination.

Well, that slaughtered morsel of skin and bone finished it. The slaughtering had been the most natural thing in the world. Agatha had put the creature on the pavement for a moment and turned to look in a shop window. Some dog from the other side of the street had enticed the trembling object. It had started tottering across, uttering tiny snorts of sensual excitement behind its absurd muzzle. A Rolls-Royce had done the rest. It had suffered very little damage, and laid out on Miss Morganhurst's red lacquer table, it really looked finer than it had ever done. Agatha, of course, was terrified. She knew better than anyone how deeply her mistress had loved the poor trembling image. Sob-

bing, she explained. She was really touched, I think —quite truly touched for half a minute. Then, when she saw how quietly Miss Morganhurst took it, she regained her courage. Miss Morganhurst said nothing but "Yes." Agatha regained, with her courage, her volubility. Words poured forth. She could needs tell madame how deeply, deeply she regretted her carelessness. She would kill herself for her carelessness if madame preferred that. How she could! Madame might do with her what she wished. . . .

But all that Miss Morganhurst said was "Yes."

Miss Morganhurst went into her bedroom to dress for dinner, and Tiny-Tee was left, at full length in all her glory, trembling no longer, upon the red lacquer table.

Agatha went downstairs for something, spoke to Fanny, the portress, and returned. Outside the bedroom door, which was ajar, she heard a strange sound, like someone cracking nuts, she described it afterwards. She went in. Miss Morganhurst, her thin grey hair about her neck, clad only in her chemise, was sitting on her bed swinging her bare legs. At sight of Agatha she screeched like a parrot. As Agatha approached she sprang off the bed and advanced at her—her back bent, her fingers bent talon-wise. A stream of words poured from her lips. Every horror, every indecency, every violation of truth and honour that the war had revealed through the press, through books, through letters, seemed to have lodged in that brain. Every murder, every rape, every slaughter of innocent children, every violation of girls and old women—they were all there. She stopped close to Agatha and the words

streamed out. At the end of every sentence, with a little sigh, she whispered—"I was there! I was there! . . . I've seen it."

Agatha, frozen with horror, remained; then, action coming back to her, she fled—Miss Morganhurst pursued her, her bare feet pattering on the carpet. She called Agatha by the name of some obscure German captain.

Agatha found a doctor. When they returned Miss Morganhurst was lying on her face on the floor in the darkness, hiding from what she saw. "I was there, you know," she whispered to the doctor as he put her to bed.

She died next day. Perhaps, after all, many people have felt the war more than one has supposed. . . .

V

PETER WESTCOTT

WESTCOTT'S astonishment when Edmund Robsart offered to lend his chambers rent free for two months was only equalled by his amazement when he discovered himself accepting that offer. Had you told him a week before that within seven days he would be sleeping in Robsart's sumptuous bed closed in by the rich sanctities of Robsart's sumptuous flat, he would have looked at you with that cool contempt that was one of Westcott's worst features; for Westcott in those days was an arrogant man—arrogant through disgust of himself and disgust of the world—two very poor reasons for arrogance.

This was the way of his accepting Robsart's offer. He had been demobilised at the beginning of March and had realised, with a sudden surprise that seemed only to confirm his arrogance, that he had no one to go and see, no work to do, no place that needed him, no place that he needed. He took a bedroom in a dirty little street off the Strand. He knew that there were two men whom he should look up, Maradick and Galleon. He swore to himself that he would die before he saw either of them. Then, in the Strand, he met Lester, a man whom he had known in his old literary days before the war. Twenty years ago Lester had been a

man of much promise, and his novel *To Paradise* had been read by everyone who wanted a short road to culture. Now the war had definitely dated him and he seemed to belong to the *Yellow Book* and the *Bodley Head* and all those days when names were so much more important than performance, and a cover with a Beardsley drawing on it hid a multitude of amateurs.

Westcott did not mind whether or no Lester were dated; he was, for the matter of that, himself dated. It was long indeed since anyone had mentioned *Reuben Hallard,* or *The Vines,* or *The Stone House.* It seemed many ages since he himself had thought of them. He liked Lester, and being a man who, in spite of his loneliness and arrogance, responded at once to kindliness, he accepted Lester's invitation to dinner. He dug up an old dinner jacket that was tight and unduly stretched across his broad shoulders and went to dinner in the Cromwell Road.

Days of failure and disappointment had not suited Mrs. Lester, who had always lived for excitement and good society, and found neither in the Cromwell Road. There was only one other guest beside Westcott, and that was Edmund Robsart, the most successful of all modern novelists. For many years Robsart's name had been a synonym for success. "It must be," thought Westcott, looking at the man's red face and superb chest and portly stomach, "at least thirty years since you published *The Prime Minister's Daughter* and hit the nail at the very first time. What a loathsome fellow you are, what harm you've done to literature, and what a gorgeous time you must have had!"

And the very first thing that Robsart said was: "You don't mean to tell me that you're Westcott, the author of *Reuben Hallard!*"

"Now you're a fool to be touched by that," Westcott said to himself. But he was astonished, nevertheless —touched, it seemed, not so much for himself as in a kind of protective way for that poor little firstling who had been both begotten and produced in a London boarding-house and had held in his little hands so much promise, so many hopes, so much pride and ambition.

Westcott was touched; he did not resent Robsart's fatherly, patronising air as of one who held always in his chubby, gouty fist the golden keys to Paradise. He drank Lester's wine and laughed at Robsart's anecdotes and was sympathetic to Mrs. Lester's complaints; he, Peter Westcott, who throughout the war had been held to be cold, conceited, overbearing, the most unpopular officer in his regiment. At the end of the evening Robsart asked him to come to lunch. "I live in Duke Street, Hortons. Everyone knows Hortons." He gave him his number. "Tuesday, 1.30. Glad to see you."

Westcott cursed himself for a fool when he went back to his Strand lodging. What did he want with men of Robsart's kidney? Had he not been laughing and mocking at Robsart for years? Had he not taken Robsart's success as a sign of the contemptible character of the British Public; when men like Galleon and Lester had been barely able to live by their pens and Robsart rolled in money—rolled in money earned by tawdry

fustian sentimentality like *The Kings of the Earth* and *Love Laughs at Locksmiths.*

Nevertheless, he went and brushed his old blue suit and rolled up to Duke Street, looking, as he always did, like an able-bodied seaman on leave. Robsart's flat was very much what he had expected it to be—quite sumptuous and quite lifeless. There was a little dining-room off what Robsart called the Library. This little dining-room had nothing in it save a round, shining gate-legged table with a glass top to it, a red Persian rug that must have been priceless, a Rodin bust of an evil-looking old woman who stuck her tongue out, and a Gauguin that looked to Westcott like a red apple and a banana, but was, in reality, a native woman by the seashore. In the Library there were wonderful books, the walls being completely covered by them.

"Most of them first or rare editions," said Robsart carelessly. Behind glass near the window were the books that he had himself written, all the different editions, the translations, the cheap "Shillings" and "Two Shillings," the strange Swedish and Norwegian and Russian copies with their paper backs, the row of "Tauchnitz," and then all the American editions with their solemn, heavy bindings. Then there were the manuscripts of the novels, all bound beautifully in red morocco, and in the bottom shelf the books with all the newspaper cuttings dating, as Westcott to his amazement saw, from 1884. Thirty-five years, and all this sumptuousness as a result! Nevertheless the books round the room looked dead, dead, dead. "Never

touched," thought Peter, "except to show them to poor humble failures like myself."

Half an hour's conversation was quite enough to strip Peter of any illusions he may have had about Robsart's natural simplicity of heart. He had invited Westcott there because he wanted a little praise from "the Younger Generation"—"needed" rather than "wanted" was perhaps the right word. Westcott was hardly the ideal victim, because he was over forty, and an undoubted failure; nevertheless, at Lester's he had appeared amiable and kindly—a little encouragement and he would say something pleasant.

Then Robsart would have soothed that tiresome, biting, bitter irritation that had beset him of late, born he knew not where, a suggestion carried on the wind that "he was behind the times," that his books "no longer sold," that no young man or woman "thought of him with anything but contempt." These things had not been said directly to him; he had not even read them in the papers. There were certain critical journals that had, of course, since the beginning of his career given him nothing but abuse if they noticed him at all. They now treated him to silence. He did not expect them to alter. But his sales *were* falling; even the critics who had supported him through all weathers were complaining a little now of monotony of subject, of repetiiton of idea. "Damn it all, what *can* you do but repeat after thirty books?" Sometimes he wondered whether he would not stop and "rest on his laurels." But that meant a diminution of income; he had always lived well and spent every penny as it came along. Moreover,

now was the worst moment to choose, with the income-tax at what it was and food and clothes and everything else at double its natural price!

As a matter of truth, he had been looking forward during the last two years to "after the war." . . . That was the time when he was going to start again. Get this war behind one and he would break out in an entirely new place—"begin all over again"—show all those young fellows that all their so-called modernity was nothing but a new trick or two for covering up the same old thing. He could do it as well as they. Write in suspensive dots and dashes, mention all the parts of the human body in full, count every tick of the clock, and call your book "Disintegration," or "Dead Moons," or "Green Queens."

Robsart liked himself in these moods, and during luncheon he amiably wandered along in this direction, plucking the flowers of his wit as he went and flinging them into Westcott's lap.

Peter grew ever more and more silent. He hated Robsart. That ghastly preoccupation with his own little affairs, the self-patting and self-applause over the little successes that he had won, above all, that blending of all the horror and tragedy of that great nightmare of a war to fit into the pattern of that mean, self-gratifying little life—these things were horrible. But, strangely, with the ever-growing disgust of Robsart and his slightly disturbed self-complacency came an evil longing in Peter's breast for some of the comfort and luxury that Robsart's life represented. Ever since that day, now so many years ago, when his wife had

run away with his best friend, he had known, it seemed, no peace, no quiet, no tranquillity. It was not security that he needed, but rather a pause in the battle of the spiritual elements that seemed to be for ever beating at his ears and driving him staggering from post to post. Had it not been for the war he had often thought, he must have succumbed before now. Final defeat, at any rate, meant rest. He had not succumbed. These years in Gallipoli and France had saved him. But he, in those desolate, death-ridden places had again and again said to himself, even as Robsart, safe in Hortons, had said: "After the war. . . . After the war. . . ." After the war Peter would build up his life again. But first, even a month's rest—somewhere that was not dirty and cheap and ill-smelling. Somewhere with good food and kind looks. . . . Then he smiled as he thought of Maradick and Galleon, his two friends, who could both give him those things. No, he wanted also freedom.

Thus, to his amazement, at the end of luncheon, when he was feeling as though he could not bear the sound of Robsart's rich, self-satisfied voice a moment longer, the man made his proposal. He was going to Scotland for two months. Would Westcott like to take the flat, free of rent, of course? It was at his disposal. He need not have meals there unless he wished.

Something in Westcott's spirit had attracted Robsart. Westcott had not given him the praise he had needed; but now he seemed to have forgotten that. The man who sat opposite to him with the thin face, the black, closely cropped hair, thin above his fore-

head, grey above the temples, with the broad shoulders, the hard, thick-set figure, the grave eyes, the nervous, restless fingers, the man who, in spite of his forty years, seemed still in some strange way a boy—that man had been through fire and tribulation such as Robsart would never know. Robsart was not a bad man, nor an unkindly; success had been the worst thing that could have happened to his soul. He put his hand on Westcott's shoulder: "You stay here and have a rest for a bit. Do just as you like. Chuck my things about. Smash the Rodin if it amuses you." Peter accepted.

When he moved, with his few possessions, into the grand place, he found it less alarming than he had expected. Hortons itself was anything but alarming. In the first place, there was the nicest girl in the world, Fanny, who was portress downstairs. She made one happy at once. Then the valet, Albert, or Albert Edward, as he seemed to prefer to be called, was the kind of man understood in a moment by Peter. They were friends in three minutes. Albert Edward had his eye on Fanny, and was going to propose one of these days. Wouldn't they make a jolly pair?

Once or twice the great Mr. Nix himself, the manager of the flats, came in to see how Peter was faring. He seemed to have an exalted idea of Peter because he was "Robsart's friend." Robsart was a very great man in Mr. Nix's eyes.

"But I'm not his friend," Peter said. "You must have been," Mr. Nix said, "for him to let you have his flat like that. I've never known him to do that before."

In three days Peter was happy; in another three

days he began to be strangled. There were too many things in the flat—beautiful things, costly things. Little golden trifles, precious china, pictures worth a fortune, first editions scattered about as though they were nothing. "Too full, too full, too full."

Peter couldn't sleep. He pushed on all the lights, and pushed them all off again. He got up, and in his old, shabby, patched pyjamas walked the length of the flat up and down, up and down. The Brahmin gods in the gold temple stared at him impassively. The Rodin old woman leered.

"Another two days and I'm done with this place," he thought. Then Murdoch Temple came to see him. Westcott had known Temple before the war; he had not seen him for five years. Temple had not altered: there was the same slight, delicate body, pale, discontented face, jet-black hair, long, nervous and conceited hands, shabby clothes too tight for the body and most characteristic of all, a melancholy and supercilious curl to his upper lip. Temple was supercilious by nature and melancholy by profession. From the very beginning it had seemed that he was destined to be a genius, and although after fifteen years of anticipation the fulfilment of that destiny was still postponed, no one could doubt, least of all Temple himself, that the day of recognition was approaching. At Oxford it had seemed that there was nothing that he could not do; in actual fact he had since then read much French and some Russian (in translation, of course), edited two little papers, strangled by an unsympathetic public almost at birth, produced a novel, a poem, and a book of criti-

cism. An unhappy chill had hung over all these things. The war, in whose progress poor health had forbidden him to take a very active part, had made of him a pessimist and pacifist; but even here a certain temperamental weakness had forbidden him to be too ardent. He was peevish rather than indignant, petulant rather than angry, unkind, rather than cruel, malicious rather than unjust, and, undoubtedly, a little sycophantic.

He had a brain, but he had always used it for the fostering of discontent. He did care, with more warmth than one would have supposed possible, for literature, but everything in it must be new, and strange, and unsuccessful. Success was, to him, the most terrible of all things, unless he himself were to attain it.

That, as things now went, seemed unlikely. During the last two years he and his friends had been anticipating all that they were going to do "after the war. . . ." There was to be a new literature, a new poetry, a new novel, a new criticism; and all these were to be built up by Temple and company. "Thank God, the war's saved us from the old mess we were in. No more Robsarts and Manisbys for us! Now we shall see!"

Peter had heard vague rumours of the things these young men were going to do. He had not been greatly interested. He was outside their generation, and his own ambitions were long deadened by his own self-contempt. Nevertheless, on this particular morning, he was glad to see Temple. There was no question but that he made as effective a contrast with Robsart as one could find.

Temple was extremely cordial. At the same time, he was frankly surprised to find Peter there.

"How did you track me?" asked Peter.

"Robsart told Maradick in Edinburgh, Meredith was writing to me. How are you after all this time?"

"All right," said Peter, smiling. The conversation then was literary, and Temple explained "how things were." Things were very bad. He used the glories of Robsart's rooms as an illustration of his purpose. He waved his hands about. "Look at these things," he seemed to say. "At these temples of gold, this china of great price, these pictures, and then look at me. Here is the contrast between true and false art."

"We want to get rid," he explained to Peter, "of all these false valuations. This wretched war has shown us at least one thing—the difference between the true and the false. The world is in pieces. It is for us to build it up again."

"And how are you going to do it?" asked Peter.

Well, it seemed that Temple's prospects were especially bright just then. It happened that Mr. Dibden, the original inventor of "Dibden's Blue Pills," was anxious to "dabble in art." He was ready to put quite a little of his "blue pill" money behind a new critical paper, and the editor of this paper was to be Temple.

"Of course," said Temple. "I'm not going to agree to it unless he guarantees us at least five years' run. A paper of the sort that I have in mind always takes some time to make its impression. In five years the world at least will be able to see what we are made of. I've no fears."

Peter, who was more ingenuous than he knew, was caught by the rather wistful eagerness in Temple's voice.

"This fellow really does care," he thought.

"We want you to come in with us," said Temple. "Of course, we shall have nothing to do with fellows like D—— and W—— and M——; men who've simply made successes by rotten work. No! But I flatter myself that there will be no one of our generation of any merit who won't join us. You must be one."

"I'm too old," said Peter, "for your young lot."

"Too old!" cried Temple. "Rot! Of course, it's a long time since *The Vineo,* but all the better. You'll be the fresher for the pause. Not like M—— and W——, who turn out novels twice a year as though they were sausages. Besides, you've been in the war. You've seen at first hand what it is. None of these ghastly high spirits about you! You'll have the right pessimistic outlook."

"I don't know that I shall," said Peter, laughing.

"Oh, yes, you will," said Temple confidently. "I'm delighted you'll join us. And I'll be able to pay well, too. Old Dibden's ready to stump up any amount."

"That's a good thing," said Peter.

He remembered that Temple had not, with the best wish in the world, been always able in the past to fulfil all his promises. In short, Peter was touched and even excited. It was so long since anyone had come to him or wanted him. Then Temple had caught him at the right moment. He was out of a job; Robsart's flat was suffocating him; he himself was feeling something of this new air that was blowing through the world.

He wondered whether after all it might not be that Temple and his friends would be given the power. They had youth, energy, a freedom from tradition. . . .

He promised Temple that he would come to tea next day, and see some of his friends.

"The paper's to be called the *Blue Moon*," said Temple. "To-morrow, then, at five."

Peter found himself at five next day in a small room off Chancery Lane. Temple met him at the door, greeted him with that rather eager and timid air that was especially his, introduced him to a young man on a green sofa, and left him.

Peter was rather amused at his own excitement. He looked about him with eagerness. Here, at any rate, was a fine contrast to Robsart. No gold gods and precious Rodins in this place. The room was bare to shabbiness. The only picture on the ugly wall-paper was a copy of some post-impressionist picture stuck on to the paper with a pin.

It was a warm spring day, and the room was very close. Some half a dozen men and two girls were present; very much bad tobacco was being smoked. Somewhere near the untidy fire-place was a table with tea on it. "Perhaps," thought Peter, "these *are* the men who will make the new world. . . . At any rate, no false prosperity here. These men mean what they say." Looking about him, the first thing that he discovered was a strange family likeness that there seemed to be amongst the men. They all wore old, shabby, ill-fitting clothes. No hair was brushed, no collars were clean, all boots were dusty. "That's all right," thought

Peter. "There's no time to waste thinking about clothes these days."

All the same he *did* like cleanliness, and what distressed him was that all the young men looked unwell. One of them, indeed, was fat. But it was an unhealthy stoutness, pale, blotchy, pimpled. Complexions were sallow, bodies undeveloped and uncared-for. It was not that they looked ill-fed—simply that they seemed to have been living in close atmospheres and taking no exercise. . . . Listening then to the talk he discovered that the tone of the voices was strangely the same. It was as though one man were speaking, as though the different bodies were vehicles for the same voice. The high, querulous, faint, scornful voice ran on. It seemed as though, did it cease, the room would cease with it—the room, the sofa, the wall-paper, the tea-table cease with it, and vanish. One of the pale young men was on the sofa stroking a tiny, ragged moustache with his rather dirty fingers. He raised sad, heavy eyes to Peter's face, then, with a kind of spiritual shudder as though he did not like what he had seen there, dropped them.

"It's rather close in here, isn't it?" said Peter at last.

"Maybe," said the young man. . . .

One of the young women, directed apparently by Temple, came over to Peter. She sat down on the sofa and began eagerly to talk to him. She said how glad she was that he was going to join them. Although she spoke eagerly, her voice was tired, with a kind of angry, defiant ring in it. She spoke so rapidly

that Peter had difficulty in following her. He asked who the men in the room were.

"That's Somers," she said, pointing to the stout man, "Hacket Somers. Of course, you know his work? I've got his new poem here. Like to see it? We shall have it in the first number of the *Blue Moon.*"

She handed Peter a page of typed manuscript. He read it eagerly. Here, then, was the new literature. It was apparently a poem. It was headed "Wild West —Remittance Man."

The first three verses were as follows:

"Schlemihl no mother weep for
doomed for a certain time—

Rye whisky—a fungus
Works into each face—line—
The Bond-street exterior—
tears at his vitals—
gravely the whisker droops
his eyes are cold.

Immaculate meteor
Inside a thick ichos
outside a thick ether
quenched the bright music . . .

Peter read these three verses; then a second time, then a third. The young woman was talking fiercely as he read. She turned to him:

"Aren't they splendid?" she said. "Hacket at his best. I was a little doubtful of him, but now there's no question. . . ."

"Frankly," said Peter, "I don't understand them. It's about a drunkard, isn't it? I see that, but. . . ."

"Don't understand it!" cried the young woman. "What don't you understand?"

"Well, for instance," said Peter, "'Immaculate meteor.' Is that the world, or Bond Street, or the whisky?" He felt her contempt.

She laughed.

"Well, of course, Hacket's poems aren't for everybody," she said.

She got up then, and left him. He knew the report that she would make of him to Temple. He sat there bewildered. He began to feel lonely and a little angry. After all it was not his fault that he had not understood the poem. Or was it the heat of the room? He wished that someone would offer him some tea, but everyone was talking, talking, talking. He sat back and listened. The talk eddied about him, dazing him, retreating, rolling back again. He listened. Every kind of topic was there—men, women, the war, Germany, poetry, homo-sexuality, divorce, adultery, Walt Whitman, Sapho, names, strange names, American names, French names, Russian names, condemning Him, condemning Her, condemning It, the war, Man . . . Woman . . .

Once and again he caught popular names. How *they* were condemned! The scorn, the languid, insolent scorn. Then pacifism. . . . He gathered that two of the men in the room had been forced to dig potatoes for the Government because they didn't believe in war. Patriotism! The room quivered with scorn. Patriots! It was as though you had said murderers or adulterers! His anger grew. Robsart was better than this, far, far better. At least Robsart tried to make something

out of life. He was not ashamed to be happy. He did not condemn. He was doubtful about himself, too. He would not have asked Peter to lunch had he not been doubtful . . . And the arrogance here. The room was thick with it. The self-applause mounted higher and higher. The fat man read one of his poem. Only a few words reached Peter. "Buttock . . . blood . . . cobra . . . loins . . . mud . . . shrill . . . bovine . . ."

Suddenly he felt as though in another moment he would rush into their midst, striking them apart, crying out against them, as condemnatory, as arrogant as they. He got from his sofa and crept from the room. No one noticed him. In the street the beautiful, cool, evening air could not comfort him. He was wretched, lonely, angry, above all, most bitterly disappointed. It seemed to him as he walked along slowly up Fleet Street that life was really hopeless and useless. On the one side, Robsart; on the other, these arrogant fools, and in the middle, himself, no better than they—worse, indeed—for they at least stood for something, and he for nothing, absolutely nothing. That absurd poem had, at any rate, effort behind it, striving, ambition, hope. He had cared all his life for intellectual things, had longed to achieve some form of beauty, however tiny, however insignificant. . . . He had achieved nothing. Well, that knowledge would not have beaten him down had he felt the true spirit of greatness in these others. He realised now how deeply he had hoped from that meeting. He had believed in the new world of which they were all talking; he had

believed that its creation would be brought about by the forces of art, of brotherhood, of kindliness, and charity, and nobility. And then to go and listen to a meeting like Temple's? But what right had he to judge them, or Robsart, or anyone?

Only too ready to believe himself a failure, it seemed now that the world too was a failure; that the worst things that the pessimists had said during the war were now justified. Above all he detested his own arrogance in judging these other men.

He had come by now to Piccadilly Circus. He was held by the crowd for a moment on the kerb outside Swan & Edgar's. The Circus was wrapped in a pale, honey-coloured evening glow. The stir of the movement of the traffic was dimmed as though it came through a half-open door. Peter felt calm touch his bitter unhappiness as he stood there. He stayed as though someone had a hand on his shoulder and was holding him there. He was conscious for the second time that day of anticipation. Now, having been cheated once, he tried to drive it away, but it would not leave him, and he waited almost as though he were expecting some procession to pass. The shops were closing, and many people were going home. As he stood there Big Ben struck six o'clock, and was echoed from St. James's and St. Martin's. People were coming in prepared for an evening's amusement. The last shoppers were waiting for the omnibuses to take them up Regent Street.

Opposite Peter there were the Criterion posters *Our Mr. Hepplewhite,* and opposite Mr. Hepplewhite Mlle. Delysia was swinging her name in mid-air to

entice the world into the Pavilion. Every kind of shop crowded there round the Circus—barbers', and watch-makers', and bag-makers', and hosiers', and jewellers', and tobacconists', and restaurants, and tea-shops—there they all were; and the omnibuses, like lumbering mastodons or ichthyosauri, came tottering and tumbling into the centre, finding their heavy, thick-headed way out again as though they were blinded by this dazzling, lighted world.

He was struck, as he watched, by the caution, the hesitation, the apparent helplessness of all the world. Londoners had always been represented as so self-confident, self-assured, but if you watched to-night, it seemed that everyone hesitated. Young men with their girls, women with babies, men, boys; again and again Peter saw in faces that same half-timid, half-friendly glance; felt on every side of him a kindliness that was born of a little terror, a little dread. There was some parallel to the scene in his mind. He could not catch it, his mind strove back. Suddenly, with the big form of a policeman who stepped in front of him to control the traffic, he knew of what it was that he was thinking. Years ago, when he had first come up to London, he had lived in a boarding-house, and there had been there a large family of children with whom he had been very friendly. The parents of the children had been poor, but their single living-room had been a nursery of a happy, discordant kind. Every sort of toy had found its way in there, and Peter could see the half-dozen children, now trembling, fighting, laughing, crying, the mother watching them and guarding them.

The Circus was a nursery. The blue evening sky was closed down, a radiant roof. Everywhere were the toys. Now it seemed that balls were danced in the air; now that someone sang or rang bells; now that some new game was suddenly proposed and greeted with a shout of joy. The children filled the Circus; the policemen were toy policemen, the omnibuses toy omnibuses, the theatres toy theatres.

On every side of him Peter felt the kindliness, the helplessness, the pathos of his vision. They were children; he was a child; the world was only a nursery, after all. The sense of his earlier indignation had left him. It seemed now that anger and condemnation, whether of Robsart, or Temple and his friends, or of himself, were absurd. They were all children together, children in their ignorance, their helplessness, children in their love for one another, their generosity, and their hope.

For the first time in his life that sense of disappointment that had been for so long a stumbling-block to all his effort left him. He felt as though, like Pilgrim, he had suddenly dropped his pack. Children in the nursery—the lot of them. No place in this world for high indignation, for bitterness, for denunciation.

The injustice, the ill-humour, the passions of life were like the quarrels in children's play; the wisest man alive knew just as much as his nursery-walls could show him.

He laughed and turned homewards.

The new world? Perhaps. The progress of the world? Perhaps. Meanwhile, there were nursery-tea,

a game of pirates, and a fairy-tale by the fire . . . and after it all, that sound, dreamless sleep that only children know. Would one wake in the morning and find that one was leaving the nursery for school? Who could tell? No one returned with any story. . . .

Meanwhile, there was enough to do to help in keeping the nursery in order, in seeing that the weaker babies were not trodden upon, in making sure that no one cried himself to sleep.

Anger and condemnation would never be possible again; no, nor would he expect the Millennium.

VI

LUCY MOON

LUCY MOON was the daughter of the Reverend Stephen Moon, Rector of Little Hawkesworth in North Yorkshire. She was twenty-one years of age, and pretty. She was so pretty indeed that she reminded one young man in Hawkesworth of "a cornfield under a red moon," and the Reverend Simon Laud, to whom she was engaged, thought of her privately as his "golden goddess," from which it will be seen that she had yellow hair and a peach-like complexion.

She had lived always a very quiet and retired life, the nearest to adventure being two or three expeditions to Scarborough. She did not know, however, that her life was retired. She was never dull. She had two younger brothers, and was devoted to her father and mother. She never questioned their authority. She read the books that they advised, and wished to read no others. The life that ebbed and flowed around the rectory seemed to her a very exciting one, and it was not until the Reverend Simon Laud, rector of a neighbouring parish, proposed to her, and she found that she accepted him, although she did not love him, that she began to wonder, a little uncertainly, with a little bewilderment, about herself. She had accepted him because everyone had agreed that it was so obviously

the right thing for her to do. She had known him ever since she could remember. He was older than she, and kindly, although he had asthma and his knees cracked. He had been rector of his parish for twenty years, and everyone said that he was a very good man indeed. He had a sense of humour too, and his Penny Readings were the best in all North Yorkshire. It was not until Simon had kissed her that Lucy wondered whether she were doing right. She did not like him to kiss her. His nose seemed so large when near to her, and his lips tried to catch hers and hold them with a kind of sucking motion that was quite distressing to her. She looked ridiculously young when Mr. Laud proposed to her, with her fair gold hair piled up in coils on the top of her head, her cheeks crimsoned with her natural agitation, and her young, childish body, like a boy's, slender and strong under her pink cotton gown.

"My little girl!" Mr. Laud said, and kissed her again. She went up to her room and cried for quite a long time. Then, when she saw how happy her mother was, she was happy too. Perhaps he would not want to kiss her after they were married.

Then came the marvellous event. Her Aunt Harriet, Mrs. Comstock, her mother's sister, and a rich widow, asked her to come and stay with her for a month in London. Mrs. Comstock was a good-natured, chattering widow, fond of food and bright attire; Mrs. Moon hesitated about committing Lucy to her care, but she felt perhaps it would do the child no harm to give her a peep at worldly ways, before the long black arms of Simon Laud closed her in for ever. Lucy was terri-

fied and delighted both at once. It meant that she would see London, where she had never in all her life been. Even the war had not altered her. She had worked in the village institute, knitted and sewed, helped in the village concerts. The war had seemed very remote to her. She had lost no one whom she loved. She was vaguely distressed by it, as she might have been by the news of an earthquake at Naples. The Moon household believed in tranquillity. Mr. Moon was engaged in a series of village addresses on "The Nativity." The war, after all, he felt, "is probably a blessing in disguise!"

So Lucy saw it. I think, as the day of her departure drew near, that she had some slight premonition of future events. The village, the fields, the lanes, the church, were touched suddenly by some new and pathetic splendour. The spring came late to Yorkshire that year, and the lanes were coloured with a faint shadow of purple behind the green, so light and shining that it seemed to be glass in its texture. The bright spaces of the moon were uncertain in their dim shadows, and there were soft spongy marshes where the frost had released the underground streams, and long stretches of upland grass, grey-white beneath the pale spring skies. Space was infinite. The village, tucked under the rim of the moor with its grey church, its wild, shaggy, tiny graveyard, its spreading village street, was like a rough Yorkshire child huddling for protection beneath its father's shoulder. This had pathos and an appeal for love, and a cry of motherhood. The clouds, carried by the fresh spring wind, raced

above the church steeple, swinging the young birds in their flight, throwing joyfully, contemptuously, shadows across the long street, shadows coloured and trembling like banners.

Lucy had known these beauties all her life; now they appealed to her with a new urgency. "When you come back," they seemed to say to her, "we shall not be the same. Now you are free as we. When you come back you will be a prisoner."

It was strange to her, and horrible, that the thought of her approaching marriage should haunt her as it did. There were things about it that she had not realised. She had not understood that her parents, the village, her relations would all make so momentous an affair of it. When Mr. Laud had proposed to her, and she had accepted him, it had seemed to her a matter simply between themselves. Now everyone had a concern in it; everyone accepted it as so absolutely settled. Did Lucy for a single instant contemplate the breaking of an engagement she saw with an almost agonised terror the whole village tumbling upon her head. The very church steeple would fall down and crush her. She was beginning too, to see her father and mother now in a new light. They had always been very sweet to her, and she had loved them dearly, but they had been sweet to her, she could not help but see, very largely because she had shown so absolute an obedience. Her mind now would persistently return to certain occasions in her young history when she had hinted ever so slightly at having an opinion of her own.

Had that opinion been given a moment's opportunity? Never. Never once.

Of her two parents, her father was perhaps the more resolute. His mild, determined surprise at the expression of an individual opinion was a terrible thing to witness. He did wish not to be dogmatic with her, but, after all, things were as they were. How could bad be good or good bad? There you were. A thing was either right, or it wasn't. . . . *There* you were.

And so around Lucy and her Simon a huge temple was erected by the willing hands of her parents, relations, and friends. There *she* was right inside with the doors locked and the windows closed, and Simon with his long black arms, his large nose, and his damp red mouth waiting for her.

It was her own fault. There was nothing to be done.

It must not be supposed, however, that she was unhappy when she set off on her London visit. She was entirely resigned to the future; she loved her mother and father and the village, and Mr. Laud had been assigned to her by God. She would enjoy her month, and then make the best of it. After all, he would not want always to kiss her. She knew enough about married life to be sure of that.

She went up to London with a neat black trunk, a new hat with roses on it, and a little umbrella, green and white, that her mother gave her.

Mrs. Comstock had a flat at Hortons, in Duke Street.

To Lucy Duke Street meant nothing. Jermyn Street meant nothing. Even Piccadilly did not mean very much. St. James's Palace, however, did mean a good

deal, and the first sight of that pearl-grey dignity and beauty, with the round friendly clock, little clouds like white pillows in the blue sky above, the sentry in his box, the grace and courtesy of the Mall, these brought a sob into her throat, and made her eyes dry and hot.

That sight of the palace gave her the setting for the rest of the wonderful new world. Had Mrs. Comstock allowed her, she would have spent the whole of her time in those fascinating streets. Piccadilly frightened her a little. The motor-omnibuses and cars rushed so fiercely along, like pirates on a buccaneering expedition, and everyone was so haughty, and the shops so grand.

But it never ceased to be marvellously romantic to her that you could so swiftly slip through an alley and be hushed at once with a lovely tranquillity, no sound reaching you but the cry of the flower-man, the distant honk of a taxicab, the bells of St. James's Church, the distant boom of Westminster. All the shops in these streets round Hortons seemed to her romantic fancy to be coloured a rich old walnut. And against this background there was every kind of treasure—prints of coaches stuck deep in snowdrifts, of huntsmen leaping over hedges, of fishermen wading deep in tranquil rivers, of Oxford colleges and Westminster Abbey—all these, printed in deep old rich colours, blue and red and orange, colours so deep and rich that they seemed to sink far down into the page. There were also the jewels and china and boxes—old Toby jugs and delicate cups and saucers, and amber-bead necklaces, and Chinese gods, and cabinets of rich red lacquer. She had a permanent picture of these treasures in the old

dark shops, and from the house's bachelors, young and old, plain and handsome, but all beautifully dressed, stepping in and out, going, she supposed, to their clubs and dinners and games, carrying with them everywhere that atmosphere of expensive cigars and perfectly-pressed clothes and innumerable baths.

She gathered all this in the first day or two of her stay, and it was as delightful and personal to her, as though she herself had been God, and had created it all.

Hortons, in its own turn, was delighted with *her*. It had never seen anything so fresh and charming in all its long life. It had often received beautiful women into its capacious heart, and it had known some very handsome men, but Lucy was lovely. Mr. Nix, who could be on occasions a poet, said of her that she made him think of "strawberries and junket and his own self at twenty." He did not say this to Mrs. Nix.

To Lucy, the only thing that was wrong with Hortons was her aunt. She disliked Mrs. Comstock from the very first moment. She did not like the way that she was over-dressed, the way that she talked without looking at you, the way that she spoke so crossly to her maid, the way that she loved her food, the way that she at once implied that it was wonderfully fortunate for Lucy to have her to come to.

She discovered at once that her aunt was on the side of her parents with regard to Mr. Simon Laud. Mrs. Comstock's opinion was that Lucy might consider herself very fortunate to have been selected by so good a man, that she must do her best to deserve her good for-

tune, because girls nowadays don't find it easy to pick up men. Men know too much!

"To pick up men!" What a horrible phrase! And Lucy had not picked up Simon Laud. She had been picked up—really against her will. Lucy then discovered that her Aunt Harriet—that is, Mrs. Comstock—had invited her to London for this month in order to have a companion. She had a paid companion—Miss Flagstaff—but that unfortunate woman had at last been allowed a holiday. Here was a whole month, then, and what was poor Mrs. Comstock to do? Why, of course, there was that niece up in Yorkshire. The very thing. She would do admirably.

Lucy found that her first duty was to read every morning the society papers. There was the *Tatler* with Eve's letter. There was the *Queen* and the *Lady's Pictorial,* and several other smaller ones. These papers appeared once a week, and it was Lucy's duty to see that they stretched out, two hours every morning, from Saturday to Saturday.

Aunt Harriet had society at her fingers' ends, and the swiftly succeeding marriages of Miss Elizabeth Asquith, Miss Violet Keppel, and Lady Diana Manners just about this time gave her a great deal to do. She had a scrap-book into which she pasted photographs and society clippings. She labelled this "Our leaders," and Lucy's morning labours were firmly linked to this scrap-book. Once she pasted an impressionist portrait of Miss Keppel upside-down into the book, and saw for a full five minutes what Aunt Harriet was like when she was really angry.

"I'd better go back to Hawkesworth!" Lucy cried, more defiant than she would ever have suspected she could be. However, this was not at all what Aunt Harriet wanted; Lucy was making herself extremely useful. Lucy did not want it either. So peace was made. One result of this snipping up of society was that Lucy began to be strangely conscious of the world that was beating up around her.

A strange, queer, confused, dramatic world! For positively the first time she was aware of some of the things that the war had done, of what it had meant to many people, of the chasms that it had made in relationships, the ruins in homes, and also of the heroisms that it had emphasised—and, beyond all these individual things, she had a sense of a new world rising painfully and slowly from the chaos of the old—but rising! Yes, even through these ridiculous papers of her aunt's, she could feel the first stirrings, the first trumpetings to battle, voices sounding, only a little distance from her, wonderful new messages of hope and ambition.

This affected her; she began to wonder how she could, through all these four years of war, have stayed so quietly in her remote Hawkesworth. She began to despise herself because she had stayed.

This excitement developed quickly into the same kind of premonition that she had had before leaving Hawkesworth. Something was about to happen to her! What would it be? She awoke every morning with a strange, burning excitement in her throat, a confused, thick beating of the heart.

Meanwhile, her month was drawing to its close, the days speeding on through a glittering pageant of wonderful May weather, when the town sparkled and quivered like a heap of quartz.

Simon Laud wrote that he was coming up to London to fetch her, to take her back with him to Hawkesworth —"that he could not wait any longer without seeing his pet."

When Lucy read those words she was strangely tranquillised. She did not know what it was that, during these days, she had been wanting. What so strangely had she been expecting? Whom? . . .

Her inexperience cried out to Simon Laud to come and defend her. She had a time of true terror, frightened by Aunt Harriet, by London, by strikes and wars and turbulences, above all, by her own self, and by the discontents and longings and desires to which some influence seemed to be urging her.

She wrote her first loving letter to Simon. She told him that she hoped that they would be married very soon, and that indeed he was to come and fetch her. It would be lovely to go back to Hawkesworth with him. And when she had posted her letter, she sat on her bed in her little room in Hortons with her face in her hands and cried bitterly, desperately—why, she did not know. Mrs. Comstock saw that she had been crying, and was moved by the child-like simplicity and innocence of "poor stupid Lucy," as she called her to herself. She was moved to unusual generosity, and suggested that they should go that night to a symphony concert at the Queen's Hall—"Although they are going

to play Brahms, which I can't say that I approve of, because he was surely a German, if anyone ever was, and haven't we got plenty of good music of our own, I wonder? Anyway, you needn't listen to the Brahms, Lucy, if you don't want to. You won't understand him, anyway. I expect he's one of the most difficult of the composers, although he *is* dead."

Lucy paid small attention. She had been out only twice with her aunt in the evening during her London stay, once to a lecture on "Y.M.C.A. Work at the Front," and once to a musical play, *Monsieur Beaucaire*. She had liked the lecture, but she had adored *Beaucaire*, and she thought that perhaps the Queen's Hall would be something of the same kind.

She had never in all her life been to a "Symphony Concert."

Aunt Harriet, armour-plated with jewellery, made an exciting contrast with Lucy, whose blazing red-gold hair, large, rather puzzled eyes, and plain white dress, needed exotic surroundings to emphasise their true colour.

"You look very pretty, dear," said Aunt Harriet, who had made that evening a little money on the Stock Exchange, and was happy accordingly, "and quite excited, just as though you were expecting to see your Simon."

"I wish he could have arrived to-night instead of to-morrow," said Lucy.

But did she? As they drove through the streets scattered with star-dust, watched by a crimson moon, she sighed with that strange confusion of happiness

and unhappiness that seemed always to be hers now. What was going to happen? Who was coming? . . . Only Simon?

She felt a return of her earlier breathless excitement as they pushed their way through the crowd in the lobby. "Stalls this way. . . . Downstairs to the stalls." "To your right, madam. Second on your right!" "Tickets, please . . . tickets, please!"

Mrs. Comstock was a redoubtable general on these occasions, and pushed people aside with her sharp elbows, and flashed indignant glances with her fine eyes, and spread back her shoulders, and sparkled her rings. . . .

Lucy wished that her aunt would not figure so prominently. She had perhaps never before disliked her so thoroughly as she did to-night. Then, out of the confusion and noise, there came peace. They were settling down into their seats, and on every side of them were space and light and colour, and a whispering murmur like the distant echo of the sea on Scarborough beach. Lucy was suddenly happy. Her eyes sparkled, her heart beat high. She looked about her and was pleasantly stirred by the size of the building. "Not so large as the Albert Hall," she had heard someone say. Why, then, how truly enormous the Albert Hall must be—and she thought suddenly, with a little kindly contempt, of Simon, and how very small he would seem placed in the middle of the stalls all by himself.

The musicians began to file into their seats; the lights turned up; the strangest discordances, like the voices of spirits in a lost world, filled the air; everywhere

clumps of empty seats vanished . . . people, people from the ceiling to the floor. . . . A little man stepped forward, stood upon his platform, bowed to the applause, held with uplifted baton a moment's silence, then released upon the air the accustomed harmonies of *Ruy Blas*.

To Lucy, who knew so little of life, that flooding melody of sound was the loveliest discovery. She sat back very straight, eyes staring, drinking it in, forgetting at once the lighted hall, her aunt, everything. Only Simon Laud persisted with her. It seemed as though to-night his figure refused to leave her.

He did not—oh! how instantly she knew it—fit in at all with the music. It was as though he were trying to draw her away from it, trying to persuade her that she did not really like it. He was interfering with her happiness, buzzing at her ear like an insect. She shook her head as though to drive this something away, and, even as she did so, she was aware that something else was happening to her.

Someone was looking at her. She felt a truly desperate impatience at this second interruption. Someone was trying to force her to turn her head—yes, to the right. She was looking straight in front of her, down to where the hard, thick back of the little conductor seemed to centralise into itself, and again to distribute all the separate streams of the music. Lucy was staring at that back as though her maintaining her connection with it was her only link with the music. How tiresome that she should not be allowed to concentrate on her happiness! She violently dismissed the shadowy

Simon; but he was there, just behind her left shoulder. Then, with another effort of will, she forced away from her that attraction on the right. She *would* not look! In all probability, it was imagination. She had known in Hawkesworth, in church, at the Penny Readings, that sensation that people were staring at her; simply her self-consciousness. She drove it off; it came closer to her. It was as though a voice were saying in her ear: "You *shall* look to the right. . . . You *shall* look to the right. . . ."

"I won't! . . . I won't!" she replied, setting her teeth. Then, to her own pain and distress, she began to blush. She had always detested her inevitable blushing, despised herself for her weakness; she could not fight it; it was stronger than she. Surely all the hall was looking at her. She felt as though soon she would be forced to run away and hide in the comforting darkness of the street.

The music ceased; the little man was bowing; the tension was lifted; everywhere a buzz of talk rose, as though everyone for the last ten minutes had been hidden beneath a glass cover that was suddenly raised. Late comers, with anxious glances, peered about for their seats. Lucy turned around.

She saw at once that indeed it was true that someone had been staring at her. Someone was staring at her now. She stared in return. She knew that she should not. Her mother had always taught her that to stare at a stranger was almost the worst thing that you could do. Nevertheless, Lucy glanced. She could not help herself. He was looking at her as though he knew her.

When she looked in her turn the start that he gave, the way that a half-smile hovered about his lips, was almost an acknowledgment of recognition. And had she not known him before? He seemed so familiar to her—and yet, of course, he could not be. The conviction that she had been staring suddenly overwhelmed her with shame, and she turned away. But now he was impressed upon her brain as though she were looking at a picture of him—his large, rather ugly, but extremely good-humoured face, his fair, rather untidy hair, his fair eyebrows, his short, closely-clipped moustache, his black dinner-jacket, and black bow tie—above all, that charming, doubtful, half-questioning smile.

But why, if they had never met before, did he stare like that? Why did . . .?

The applause had broken out again. A tall man holding a violin was bowing. The Brahms violin concerto began.

She sat there in a puzzled and bewildered state. What had happened to her? Who had come to her, lifting her, it seemed, out of her own body, transforming her into some other creature? Was she feeling this merely because a man had stared at her? She felt, as she sat there, the blush still tingling in her cheeks, as though some precious part of her that had left her many years ago had now suddenly returned to her.

She was Lucy Moon, the whole, complete Lucy Moon, for the first time. . . .

The first movement of the symphony ended. She looked at once to her right. His eyes were resting on her. She smiled.

How could she? Did she not know, had she not been told ever since she could remember, that the most terrible thing that a girl could do was to smile at a stranger? But he was *not* a stranger. She knew everything about him. She knew, although she had never heard him speak, just what the tone of his voice would be, rough, a little Scotch, and north country mixed . . . not many words; he would be shy and would stammer a little. At the end of the second movement she smiled again. He smiled back and raised his eyebrows in a laughing question.

At the end of the symphony the air crackled with applause. The violinist returned again and again, bowing. He seemed so small, and his magnificent evening dress did not suit him. Evening dress did not suit Simon either. The applause died away. The orchestra disappeared through the back of the hall.

"So hot," said Aunt Comstock, whom, until now, Lucy had utterly forgotten. "A breath of air outside. . . ."

They went into the passage. People were walking up and down. They halted beside a swaying door. Mrs. Comstock stood there, her purple bosom heaving up and down. "No air. . . . Can't think why they don't . . ."

Her fine eyes flashed. She had seen Mrs. Norris. Are not those things arranged by God? Mrs. Norris, whom she had not seen for so many months. Are not these things arranged by God? Lucy's friend was at her elbow. He was as she had known that he would be; kind-eyed, clumsy perhaps, his voice rough and hesi-

tating. . . . He was alone. He stood turned a little away from her, and she, as though she had been practising these arts all her life, looked at the pea-green Mrs. Norris, and the pearls that danced on her bony neck. The voices crept towards one another. No one would have known that Lucy's mouth moved at all.

"Can't we get away somewhere?"

"I'm with my aunt."

"I *must* see you."

"Yes."

"I *must.*"

"I'm with my——"

"I know."

"Perhaps at the end——"

"No, give me somewhere to write to."

"It's——"

Aunt Comstock's voice came sailing like a pirate's ship.

"Amy, this is my niece, Lucy."

"How do you do? Are you enjoying London, dear?"

He was gone. Oh, he was *gone!* And no address.

She could have slain those two women, one so fat, and one so thin—willingly, stabbed them. Perhaps she would lose him now.

They returned. "Something of Bizet's. He was French, Lucy. French or a Spaniard. . . . Fancy Amy Norris—lost her looks, poor dear. Ah! I shall like this. Better than that German."

Lucy heard no more music. Her heart beat in her throat, choking it. Life had rushed towards her and filled her, or was it that she had entered into life? She

did not know. She only felt intensely proud, like a queen entering her capital for the first time. . . . The concert was over. Her aunt was a long time putting on her cloak; people stood in their way, stupid, heavy, idiotic people. When they came into the hall he was not there. . . . Yes. . . . he was close to them. For a moment, in the thick crowd, he caught her hand. At the touch of his fingers, rough and strong, upon hers, she seemed to soar above the crowd and to look down upon them all with scornful happiness. He said something that she could not catch, and then Aunt Comstock had hatefully enveloped her. They were in a taxi, and all the world that had been roaring around her was suddenly hushed. They reached Hortons. Lucy drank her hot milk. Her aunt said:

"I do hope you enjoyed your concert, darling. . . . The Bizet was best."

She had undressed, and was lying on her bed, flat on her back, staring up at the white ceiling, upon whose surface circles, flung from the lights beyond the window, ran and quivered. She watched the circles, but she was not thinking at all. She seemed to be lapped about by a sea of warm happiness. She floated on this; she neither slept nor thought. Early in the morning she sank into dreamless slumber.

She came down to breakfast tired with happy weariness. She found Simon Laud waiting for her. She stared at him at first as though she had never seen him before. He was not looking his best. He explained that he had caught the night train at York. He was afraid that he had not shaved nor washed, but that

Mrs. Comstock had kindly said: "Have your breakfast first . . . with us. Lucy has just been longing for you."

Lucy took all this in at last. She saw the bright little room with the sun pouring in, the breakfast things with the silver tea-pot and the porridge, and Aunt Comstock in her pink tea-gown. She saw these things, and then Simon Laud took a step towards her.

"Dear Lucy!" he said. That step showed her that there was no time to be lost. Simon Laud must never touch her again. Never!

"Simon, I wasn't expecting you. But it's just as well, really. It will get it over more quickly. I must tell you at once that I can't marry you!"

Her first feeling after her little speech, which seemed in a strange way not to have been made by herself at all, was that it was a great shame to say such a thing to him when he was looking so dirty and so unwashed. She broke out with a little cry:

"Oh, Simon, I'm sorry!"

"Lucy!" she heard Aunt Comstock exclaim.

Mr. Laud had no words. He looked truly pitiful as his long, rather dirty fingers sought the tablecloth. Then he laughed.

"Why, Lucy, dear," he said. "What *do* you mean?"

"I mean just what I've said," she answered. "We mustn't marry. It would be wicked, because I don't love you. I knew from the first that I didn't, but I had had no experience. I thought you must all know better. I don't love you, and I never, never will."

"Lucy!" Aunt Comstock had risen. Lucy had the

odd feeling that her aunt had known that this moment would come, and had been waiting with eager anticipation for it. "Do you know what you've said? But you *can't* know. You're out of your mind, you wicked girl. Here's Mr. Laud come all the way from Yorkshire, by night too, just to be with you for a day or two, and you receive him like this. Why, it was only last night that you told me that you wished he would come—and now! You must be out of your mind!"

"I'm not out of my mind," said Lucy, "and I'm sure Simon wouldn't wish me to marry him if I didn't love him."

"Did she really say that last night, Mrs. Comstock?" said Mr. Laud.

"Indeed she did."

"Only last night?"

"Only last night."

"Ah well, then," he heaved a sigh of relief, "it's all right! I surprised her this morning. I was too sudden. I frightened you, Lucy darling. Have some breakfast, and you'll feel quite differently."

"She'd *better* feel differently," said Mrs. Comstock, now trembling with happy temper. "I don't know what she's said this mad thing for, I'm sure, Mr. Laud, considering how she's been talking about you and wanting you all this month; but a little consideration will soon teach her.

"Do you know, Lucy, what they say of girls who try to behave as you're behaving? Do you know the name the world has for what you're doing? Have you thought

for a moment of your father and mother, and what they'll say?"

"No, I haven't," said Lucy. "But no thinking will make any difference. Nothing will."

Nevertheless, there did flash through her mind then a picture of what would happen at Hawkesworth. She had not thought of Hawkesworth; she saw now the straggling street, the church, the high downs; she saw the people who had known her since she was a baby, she saw her parents and relations. Yes, there would be a bad time to go through. And for what? Because for a moment a man whom she did not know, a man whom she would never see again, had taken her hand in his! Perhaps she *was* mad. She did not know. She only knew that she would never marry Simon Laud.

"Oh, Simon, I'm so sorry! I know I'm behaving very badly. But it's better to behave like that now than for us to be unhappy always."

He smiled at her with confidence.

"It's quite all right, Lucy, dear. I understand perfectly. You'll feel quite differently very soon. I surprised you. I shouldn't have done it, but I was so anxious to see you—a lover's privilege.

"Now," he ended with that happy optimistic air that he had developed so happily in the pulpit, "let us all have breakfast, shall we?"

Lucy shook her head, and then turned and went back to her room.

A strange day followed. She sat there until luncheon, alone, hearing the soft buzz of the traffic below her window, interrupted once by the maid, who, after her

permission had been given, moved softly about the room, setting it to rights. It was not quite true, that she was thinking during that time—it could scarcely be called thought—it was rather that a succession of pictures passed before her brain—her parents in every attitude of alarm and remonstrance and command, the village and its gossips, long long imprisonment beneath those high downs, and finally her parents again. How strange it was that last night's little incident should have illuminated everything in her life, and nothing more surely than her father and mother! How queer that a strange young man, with whom in all her life she had exchanged only one or two words, should have told her more of her own people than all her living with them could!

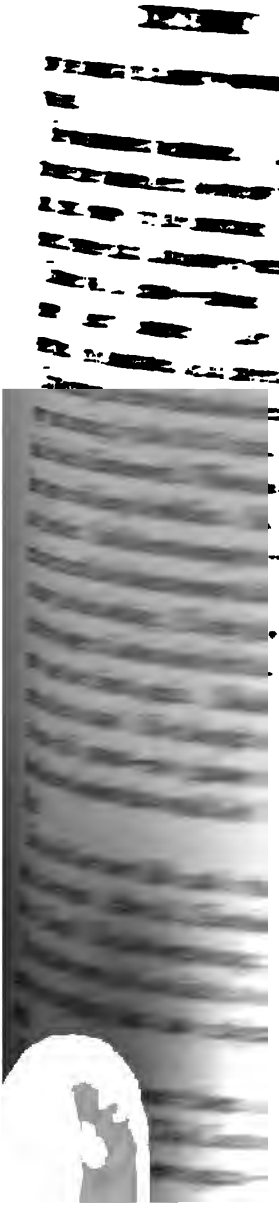
She faced her people for the first time—she knew them to be hard, narrow, provincial, selfish, intolerant. She loved them just as she had done before, because with those other qualities, they were also tender, compassionate, loving, unselfish.

But she saw now quite clearly what living with them would be.

She intended to ruin the peace and prosperity of her future life because she had met a stranger (for a second) whom she would never see again! That was the truth. . . . She accepted it without a tremor.

It was also true that that stranger, by meeting her, had made her live for the first time.

Better live uncomfortably [illegible] pretend [illegible] live, or to think you [illegible] not. W[illegible]



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In the morning the taxi was there, the bags were packed.

In the pretty green and white hall with the grandfather's clock, when Lucy tipped Fanny, the Portress, she whispered to her, "I'm coming back. They don't think I am—but I know I am. And if anyone—anyone—should ask for me, describe me, you know, so that you are sure it's me, write to me at this address."

Fanny smiled and nodded. "Now, Lucy, dear," cried Aunt Comstock, "the cab's waiting."

She was sitting in it opposite to Simon, who looked clean, but ridiculous on one of these uncomfortable third-party seats. They started up Duke Street, and turned into Piccadilly.

"I do hope you'll have a nice journey, Lucy. It's a fine day, and I've got some chocolate. . . ."

Are not these things arranged by God?

The cab was stopped by traffic just close to St. James's Church. Lucy, truly captured now like a mouse in a trap, glanced with a last wild look through the windows. A moment later she had tumbled over Simon's knees and burst open the door. She was in the street. As she ran she was conscious of whistles sounding, boys calling, the green trees of St. James's blowing. She had touched him on the arm.

"I saw you. . . . I couldn't help it. . . . I had to speak. . . ." She was out of breath. When he turned and the light of recognition flamed into his eyes, she could have died with happiness. He caught her hand. He stammered with joy.

"Everywhere," he said, "I've been looking . . .

hoping . . . I've walked about. . . . I've never thought of anything else. . . ."

"Quick," she said. "I've no time. They're in the cab there. It's our last chance. Can you remember this without writing it down?"

"Yes."

"Well—Lucy Moon, The Rectory, Hawkesworth, N. Yorkshire. KES . . . Yes. . . . Write at once. . . ."

Even in her agitation she noticed the strength and confidence of his smile.

"I'll write to-day," he assured her. "You're not married?"

"No. It's Miss."

"I'm not either." He caught her hand. "I'll find you before the week's out."

She fled. She was in the cab. Aunt Comstock and Simon regarded her with terrified eyes.

"Lucy, dear—How *could* you? What were you about? The train. . . ."

"Oh, it was a friend! I had to say good-bye. He didn't know I was going so soon."

She felt that her happiness would stifle her. She flung open the other window. She looked at them both and felt the tenderest pity because they seemed so old, so cross, so dead.

She bent over and kissed her aunt.

"Here we are," said that lady, with an air of intense relief. "Now you'll be all right, Lucy darling. You'll just have Mr. Laud to look after you."

"Yes!" cried Lucy. "Now I'm all right. . . . Come along, Simon, or we'll miss the train."

VII

MRS. PORTER AND MISS ALLEN

ONE of the largest flats on the fourth floor of Hortons was taken in March, 1919, by a Mrs. Porter, a widow. The flat was seen, and all business in connection with it was done, by a Miss Allen, her lady companion. Mr. Nix, who considered himself a sound and trenchant judge of human nature, liked Miss Allen from the first; and then when he saw Mrs. Porter he liked her too. These were just the tenants for Hortons —modest, gentle ladies with ample means and no extravagant demands on human nature. Mrs. Porter was one of those old ladies, now, alas, in our turbulent times, less and less easy to discover—"something straight out of a book," Mr. Nix called her. She was little and fragile, dressed in silver grey, forehead puckered a little with a sort of anticipation of being a trial to others, her voice cultured, soft, a little remote like the chime of a distant clock. She moved with gestures a little deprecatory, a little resigned, extremely modest —she would not disturb anyone for the world. . . .

Miss Allen was, of course, another type—a woman of perhaps forty years of age, refined, quiet, efficient, her dark hair, turning now a little grey, waved decorously from her high white forehead, pince-nez, eyes of a grave, considering brown, a woman resigned, after, it

might be, abandoning young ambitions for a place of modest and decent labour in the world—one might still see, in the rather humorous smile that she bestowed once and again upon men and things, the hint of defiance at the necessity that forced abnegation.

Miss Allen had not been in Mrs. Porter's service for very long. Wearied with the exactions of a family of children whose idle and uninspiring intelligences she was attempting to governess, she answered, at the end of 1918, an advertisement in the "Agony" column of *The Times,* that led her to Mrs. Porter. She loved Mrs. Porter at first sight.

"Why, she's a dear old lady," she exclaimed to her ironic spirit—"dear old ladies" being in those days as rare as crinolines. She was of the kind for which Miss Allen had unconsciously been looking: generous, gentle, refined, and intelligent. Moreover, she had, within the last six months, been left quite alone in the world—Mr. Porter had died of apoplexy in August, 1918. He had left her very wealthy, and Miss Allen discovered quickly in the old lady a rather surprising desire to see and enjoy life—surprising, because old ladies of seventy-one years of age and of Mrs. Porter's gentle appearance do not, as a rule, care for noise and bustle and the buzz of youthful energy.

"I want to be in the very middle of things, dear Miss Allen," said Mrs. Porter, "right in the very middle. We lived at Wimbledon long enough, Henry and I—it wasn't good for either of us. Find me somewhere within two minutes of all the best theatres."

Miss Allen found Hortons, which is, as everyone

knows, in Duke Street, just behind Piccadilly and Fortnum and Mason's, and Hatchard's and the Hammam Turkish Baths and the Royal Academy and Scott's hat-shop and Jackson's Jams—how could you be more perfectly in the centre of London?

Then Miss Allen discovered a curious thing—namely, that Mrs. Porter did not wish to keep a single piece, fragment, or vestige of her Wimbledon effects. She insisted on an auction—everything was sold. Miss Allen attempted a remonstrance—some of the things in the Wimbledon house were very fine, handsome, solid mid-Victorian sideboards and cupboards, and chairs and tables.

"You really have no idea, Mrs. Porter," said Miss Allen, "of the cost of furniture these days. It is quite terrible; you will naturally get a wonderful price for your things, but the difficulty of buying——"

Mrs. Porter was determined. She nodded her bright bird-like head, tapped with her delicate fingers on the table and smiled at Miss Allen.

"If you don't mind, dear. I know it's tiresome for you, but I have my reasons." It was not tiresome at all for Miss Allen; she loved to buy pretty new things at someone else's expense, but it was now, for the first time, that she began to wonder how dearly Mrs. Porter had loved her husband.

Through the following weeks this became her principal preoccupation—Mr. Henry Porter. She could not have explained to herself why this was. She was not, by nature, an inquisitive and scandal-loving woman, nor was she unusually imaginative. People did not,

as a rule, occur to her as existing unless she saw them physically there in front of her. Nevertheless she spent a good deal of her time in considering Mr. Porter.

She was able to make the Horton flat very agreeable. Mrs. Porter wanted "life and colour," so the sitting-room had curtains with pink roses and a bright yellow cage with two canaries, and several pretty water-colours, and a handsome fire-screen with golden peacocks, and a deep Turkish carpet, soft and luxurious to the feet. Not one thing from the Wimbledon house was there, not any single picture of Mr. Porter. The next thing that Miss Allen discovered was that Mrs. Porter was nervous.

Although Hortons sheltered many human beings within its boundaries, it was, owing to the thickness of its walls and the beautiful training of Mr. Nix's servants, a very quiet place. It had been even called in its day "cloistral." It simply shared with London that amazing and never-to-be-overlauded gift of being able to offer, in the very centre of the traffic of the world, little green spots of quiet and tranquillity. It seemed, after a week or two, that it was almost too quiet for Mrs. Porter.

"Open a window, Lucy dear, won't you," she said. "I like to hear the omnibuses."

It was a chill evening in early April, but Miss Allen threw up the window. They sat there listening. There was no sound, only suddenly, as though to accentuate the silence, St. James's Church clock struck the quarter. Then an omnibus rumbled, rattled, and was gone. The room was more silent than before.

"Shall I read to you?" said Miss Allen.

"Yes, dear, do." And they settled down to *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Mrs. Porter's apprehensiveness became more and more evident. She was so dear an old lady, and had won so completely Miss Allen's heart, that that kindly woman could not bear to see her suffer. For the first time in her life she wanted to ask questions. It seemed to her that there must be some very strange reason for Mrs. Porter's silences. She was not by nature a silent old lady; she talked continually, seemed, indeed, positively to detest the urgency of silence. She especially loved to tell Miss Allen about her early days. She had grown up as a girl in Plymouth, and she could remember all the events of that time—the balls, the walks on the Hoe, the shops, the summer visits into Glebeshire, the old dark house with the high garden walls, the cuckoo clock and the pictures of the strange old ships in which her father, who was a retired sea-captain, had sailed. She could not tell Miss Allen enough about these things, but so soon as she arrived at her engagement to Mr. Porter there was silence. London shrouded her married life with its thick, grey pall. She hated that Miss Allen should leave her. She was very generous about Miss Allen's freedom, always begging her to take an afternoon or evening and amuse herself with her own friends; but Miss Allen had very few friends, and on her return from an expedition she always found the old lady miserable, frightened, and bewildered. She found that she loved her, that she cared for her as she had cared for no human being

for many years, so she stayed with her and read to her and talked to her, and saw less and less of the outside world.

The two ladies made occasionally an expedition to a theatre or a concert, but these adventures, although they were anticipated with eagerness and pleasure, were always in the event disappointing. Mrs. Porter loved the theatre—especially did she adore plays of sentiment—plays where young people were happily united—where old people sat cosily together reminiscing over a blazing fire, where surly guardians were suddenly generous, and poor orphan girls were unexpectedly given fortunes.

Mrs. Porter started her evening with eager excitement. She dressed for the occasion, putting on her best lace cap, her cameo brooch, her smartest shoes. A taxi came for them, and they always had the best stalls, near the front, so that the old lady should not miss a word. Miss Allen noticed, however, that very quickly Mrs. Porter began to be disturbed. She would glance around the theatre and soon her colour would fade, her hands begin to tremble; then, perhaps at the end of the first act, perhaps later, a little hand would press Miss Allen's arm:

"I think, dear, if you don't mind—I'm tired—shall we not go?"

After a little while Miss Allen suggested the Cinema. Mrs. Porter received the idea with eagerness. They went to the West-End house, and the first occasion was a triumphant success. How Mrs. Porter loved it! Just the kind of a story for her—Mary Pickford in

Daddy Long Legs. To tell the truth, Mrs. Porter cried her eyes out. She swore that she had never in her life enjoyed anything so much. And the music! How beautiful! How restful! They would go every week. . . .

The second occasion was, unfortunately, disastrous. The story was one of modern life, a woman persecuted by her husband, driven by his brutality into the arms of her lover. The husband was the customary cinema villain—broad, stout, sneering, and over-dressed. Mrs. Porter fainted and had to be carried out by two attendants. A doctor came to see her, said that she was suffering from nervous exhaustion and must be protected from all excitement. . . . The two ladies sat now every evening in their pretty sitting-room, and Miss Allen read aloud the novels of Dickens one after the other.

More and more persistently, in spite of herself, did curiosity about the late Mr. Porter drive itself in upon Miss Allen. She told herself that curiosity itself was vulgar and unworthy of the philosophy that she had created for herself out of life. Nevertheless it persisted. Soon she felt that, after all, it was justified. Were she to help this poor old lady to whom she was now most deeply attached, she must know more. She could not give her any real help unless she might gauge more accurately her trouble—but she was a shy woman, shy, especially, of forcing personal confidences. She hesitated; then she was aware that a barrier was being created between them. The evening had many silences, and Miss Allen detected many strange, surreptitious

glances thrown at her by the old lady. The situation was impossible. One night she asked her a question.

"Dear Mrs. Porter," she said, her heart beating strangely as she spoke, "I do hope that you will not think me impertinent, but you have been so good to me that you have made me love you. You are suffering, and I cannot bear to see you unhappy. I want, oh, so eagerly, to help you! Is there nothing I can do?"

Mrs. Porter said nothing. Her hands quivered; then a tear stole down her cheek. Miss Allen went over to her, sat down beside her and took her hand.

"You must let me help you," she said. "Dismiss me if I am asking you questions that I should not. But I would rather leave you altogether, happy though I am with you, than see you so miserable. Tell me what I can do."

"You can do nothing, Lucy dear," said the old lady.

"But I must be able to do something. You are keeping from me some secret——"

Mrs. Porter shook her head. . . .

It was one evening in early May that Miss Allen was suddenly conscious that there was something wrong with the pretty little sitting-room, and it was shortly after her first consciousness of this that poor old Mrs. Porter revealed her secret. Miss Allen, looking up for a moment, fancied that the little white marble clock on the mantelpiece had ceased to tick.

She looked across the room, and for a strange moment fancied that she could see neither the clock nor the mantelpiece—a grey dimness filled her sight. She shook herself, glanced down at her hands, looked up

for reassurance, and found Mrs. Porter, with wide, terrified eyes, staring at her, her hands trembling against the wood of the table.

"What is it, Lucy?"

"Nothing, Mrs. Porter."

"Did you see something?"

"No, dear."

"Oh, I thought . . . I thought . . ." Suddenly the old lady, with a fierce impetuous movement, pushed the table away from her. She got up, staggered for a moment on her feet, then tumbled to the pink sofa, cowering there, huddled, her sharp fingers pressing against her face.

"Oh, I can't bear it. . . . I can't bear it. . . . I can't bear it any more! He's coming. He's coming. Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

Miss Allen, feeling nothing but love and affection for her friend, but realising strangely too the dim and muted attention of the room, knelt down beside the sofa and put her strong arms around the trembling, fragile body.

"What is it? Dear, dear Mrs. Porter. What is it? Who is coming? Of whom are you afraid?"

"Henry's coming! Henry, who hated me. He's coming to carry me away!"

"But Mr. Porter's dead!"

"Yes. . . ." The little voice was now the merest whisper. "But he'll come all the same. . . . He always does what he says!"

The two women waited, listening. Miss Allen could hear the old lady's heart thumping and leaping close

to her own. Through the opened windows came the sibilant rumble of the motor-buses. Then Mrs. Porter gently pushed Miss Allen away. "Sit on a chair, Lucy dear. I must tell you everything. I must share this with someone."

She seemed to have regained some of her calmness. She sat straight up upon the sofa, patting her lace cap with her hands, feeling for the cameo brooch at her breast. Miss Allen drew a chair close to the sofa; turning again towards the mantelpiece, she saw that it stood out boldly and clearly; the tick of the clock came across to her with almost startling urgency.

"Now, dear Mrs. Porter, what is it that is alarming you?" she said.

Mrs. Porter cleared her throat. "You know, Lucy, that I was married a great many years ago. I was only a very young girl at the time, very ignorant of course, and you can understand, my dear, that my father and mother influenced me very deeply. They liked Mr. Porter. They thought that he would make me a good husband and that I should be very happy. . . . I was not happy, Lucy dear, never from the very first moment!"

Here Mrs. Porter put out her hand and took Miss Allen's strong one. "I am very willing to believe that much of the unhappiness was due to myself. I was a young, foolish girl; I was disturbed from the very first by the stories that Mr. Porter told me, and the pictures he showed me. I was foolish about those things. He saw that they shocked me, and I think that that amused him. From the first it delighted him to

tease me. Then—soon—he tired of me. He had mistresses. He brought them to our house. He insulted me in every way possible. I had years of that misery. God only knows how I lived through it. It became a habit with him to frighten and shock me. It was a game that he loved to play. I think he wanted to see how far I would go. But I was patient through all those many years. Oh! so patient! It was weak, perhaps, but there seemed nothing else for me to be.

"The last twenty years of our married life he hated me most bitterly. He said that I had scorned him, that I had not given him children, that I had wasted his money—a thousand different things! He tortured me, frightened me, disgusted me, but it never seemed to be enough for him, for the vengeance he felt I deserved. Then one day he discovered that he had a weak heart—a doctor frightened him. He saw perhaps for a moment in my eyes my consciousness of my possible freedom. He took my arm and shook me, bent his face close to mine, and said: 'Ah, you think that after I'm dead you will be free. You are wrong. I will leave you everything that I possess, and then—just as you begin to enjoy it—I will come and fetch you!' What a thing to say, Lucy, dear! He was mad, and so was I to listen to him. All those years of married life together had perhaps turned both our brains. Six months later he fell down in the street dead. They brought him home, and all that summer afternoon, my dear, I sat beside him in the bedroom, he all dressed in his best clothes and his patent leather shoes, and the band playing in the Square outside. Oh! he was dead,

Lucy dear, he was indeed. For a week or two I thought that he was gone altogether. I was happy and free. Then—oh, I don't know—I began to imagine . . . to fancy. . . . I moved from Wimbledon. I advertised for someone, and you came. We moved here. . . . It ought to be . . . it is . . . it *must* be all right, Lucy dear; hold me, hold me tight! Don't let me go! He *can't* come back! He can't, he can't!"

She broke into passionate sobbing, cowering back on to the sofa as she had done before. The two women sat there, comforting one another. Miss Allen gathered the frail, trembling little body into her arms, and like a mother with her child, soothed it.

But, as she sat there, she realised with a chill shudder of alarm that moment, a quarter of an hour before, when the room had been dimmed and the clock stilled. Had that been fancy? Had some of Mrs. Porter's terror seized her in sympathy? Were they simply two lonely women whose nerves were jagged by the quiet monotony and seclusion of their lives? Why was it that from the first she, so unimaginative and definite, should have been disturbed by the thought of Mr. Porter? Why was it that even now she longed to know more surely about him, his face, his clothes, his height . . . everything.

"You must go to bed, dear. You are tired out. Your nerves have never recovered from the time of Mr. Porter's death. That's what it is. . . . You must go to bed, dear."

Mrs. Porter went. She seemed to be relieved by her outburst. She felt perhaps now less lonely. It seemed,

too, that she had less to fear now that she had betrayed her ghost into sunlight. She slept better that night than she had done for a long time past. Miss Allen sat beside the bed staring into the darkness, thinking. . . .

For a week after this they were happy. Mrs. Porter was in high spirits. They went to the Coliseum and heard Miss Florence Smithson sing "Roses of Picardy," and in the Cinema they were delighted with the charm and simplicity of Alma Taylor. Mrs. Porter lost her heart to Alma Taylor. "That's a *sweet* girl," she said. "I would like to meet her. I'm sure she's *good.*" "I'm sure she is," said Miss Allen. Mrs. Porter made friends in the flat. Mr. Nix met them one day at the bottom of the lift and talked to them so pleasantly. *"What* a gentleman!" said Mrs. Porter afterwards as she took off her bonnet.

Then one evening Miss Allen came into the sitting-room and stopped dead, frozen rigid on the threshold. Someone was in the room. She did not at first think of Mr. Porter. She was only sure that someone was there. Mrs. Porter was in her bedroom changing her dress.

Miss Allen said, "Who's there?" She walked forward. The dim evening saffron light powdered the walls with trembling colour. The canaries twittered, the clock ticked; no one was there. After that instant of horror she was to know no relief. It was as though that spoken "Who's there?" had admitted her into the open acceptance of a fact that she ought for ever to have denied.

She was a woman of common sense, of rational thought, scornful of superstition and sentiment. She realised now that there was something quite definite for her to fight, something as definite as disease, as pain, as poverty and hunger. She realised too that she was there to protect Mrs. Porter from everything—yes, from everything and everybody!

Her first thought was to escape from the flat, and especially from everything in the flat—from the pink sofa, the gate-legged table, the bird-cage and the clock. She saw then that, if she yielded to this desire, they would be driven, the two of them, into perpetual flight, and that the very necessity of escaping would only admit the more the conviction of defeat. No, they must stay where they were; that place was their battle-ground.

She determined, too, that Mr. Porter's name should not be mentioned between them again. Mrs. Porter must be assured that she had forgotten his very existence.

Soon she arrived at an exact knowledge of the arrival of these "attacks," as she called them. That month of May gave them wonderful weather. The evenings were so beautiful that they sat always with the windows open behind them, and the dim colour of the night-glow softened the lamplight and brought with it scents and breezes and a happy murmurous undertone. She received again and again in these May evenings that earlier impression of someone's entrance into the room. It came to her, as she sat with her back to the fireplace, with the conviction that a pair of eyes were

staring at her. Those eyes willed her to him, and she would not; but soon she seemed to know them, cold, hard, and separated from her, she fancied, by glasses. They seemed, too, to bend down upon her from a height. She was desperately conscious at these moments of Mrs. Porter. Was the old lady also aware? She could not tell. Mrs. Porter still cast at her those odd, furtive glances, as though to see whether she suspected anything, but she never looked at the fireplace nor started as though the door was suddenly opened.

There were times when Miss Allen, relaxing her self-control, admitted without hesitation that someone was in the room. He was tall, wore spectacles behind which he scornfully peered. She challenged him to pass her guard and even felt the stiff pride of a victorious battle. They were fighting for the old lady, and she was winning. . . .

At all other moments she scorned herself for this weakness. Mrs. Porter's nerves had affected her own. She had not believed that she could be so weak. Then, suddenly, one evening Mrs. Porter dropped her cards, crumpled down into her chair, screamed, "No, no . . . Lucy! . . . Lucy! He's here! . . ."

She was strangely, at the moment of that cry, aware of no presence in the room. It was only when she had gathered her friend into her arms, persuading her that there was nothing, loving her, petting her, that she was conscious of the dimming of the light, the stealthy withdrawal of sound. She was facing the fireplace; before the mantelpiece there seemed to her to hover a shadow, something so tenuous that it resembled a film of dust

against the glow of electric light. She faced it with steady eyes and a fearless heart.

But against her will her soul admitted that confrontation. From that moment Mrs. Porter abandoned disguise. Her terror was now so persistent that soon, of itself, it would kill her. There was no remedy; doctors could not help, nor change of scene. Only if Miss Allen still saw and felt nothing could the old lady still hope. Miss Allen lied and lied again and again.

"You saw nothing, Lucy?"

"Nothing."

"Not there by the fireplace?"

"Nothing, dear. . . . Of course, nothing!"

Events from then moved quickly, and they moved for Miss Allen quite definitely in the hardening of the sinister shadow. She led now a triple existence: one life was Mrs. Porter's, devoted to her, delivered over to her, helping her, protecting her; the second life was her own, her rational, practical self, scornful of shadow and of the terror of death; the third was the struggle with Henry Porter, a struggle now as definite and concrete as though he were a blackmailer confining her liberty.

She could never tell when he would come, and with every visit that he paid he seemed to advance in her realisation of him. It appeared that he was always behind her, staring at her through those glasses that had, she was convinced, large gold rims and thin gold wires. She fancied that she had before her a dim outline of his face—pale, the chin sharp and pointed, the ears large and protuberant, the head dome-shaped and

bald. It was now that, with all her life and soul in the struggle for her friend, she realised that she did not love her enough. The intense love of her life had been already in earlier years given. Mrs. Porter was a sweet old lady, and Miss Allen would give her life for her—but her soul was atrophied a little, tired a little, exhausted perhaps in the struggle so sharp and persistent for her own existence.

"Oh, if I were younger I could drive him away!" came back to her again and again. She found too that her own fear impeded her own self-sacrifice. She hated this shadow as something strong, evil, like mildew on stone, chilling breath. "I'm not brave enough. . . . I'm not good enough. . . . I'm not young enough!" Incessantly she tried to determine how real her sensations were. Was she simply influenced by Mrs. Porter's fear? Was it the blindest imagination? Was it bred simply of the close, confined life that they were leading?

She could not tell. They had resumed their conspiracy of silence, of false animation and ease of mind. They led their daily lives as though there was nothing between them. But with every day Mrs. Porter's strength was failing; the look of horrified anticipation in her eyes was now permanent. At night they slept together, and the little frail body trembled like a leaf in Miss Allen's arms.

The appearances were now regularised. Always when they were in the middle of their second game of "Patience" Miss Allen felt that impulse to turn, that singing in her ears, the force of his ironical gaze. He was now almost complete to her, standing in front of

the Japanese screen, his thin legs apart, his hostile, conceited face bent towards them, his pale, thin hands extended as though to catch a warmth that was not there.

A Sunday evening came. Earlier than usual they sat down to their cards. Through the open window shivered the jangled chimes of the bells of St. James's.

"Well, he won't come yet . . ." was Miss Allen's thought. Then with that her nightly resolve: "When he comes I must not turn—I must not look. She must not know that I know."

Suddenly he was with them, and with a dominant force, a cruelty, a determination that was beyond anything that had been before.

"Four, five, six. . . ." The cards trembled in Mrs. Porter's hand. "And there's the spade, Lucy dear."

He came closer. He was nearer to her than he had ever been. She summoned all that she had—her loyalty, her love, her honesty, her self-discipline. It was not enough.

She turned. He was there as she had always known that she would see him, his cruel, evil, supercilious face, conscious of its triumph, bent toward them, his grey clothes hanging loosely about his thin body, his hands spread out. He was like an animal about to spring.

"God help me! God help me!" she cried. With those words she knew that she had failed. She stood as though she would protect with her body her friend. She was too late.

Mrs. Porter's agonised cry, "You see him, Lucy! . . . You see him, Lucy!" warned her.

"No, no," she answered. She felt something like a cold breath of stagnant water pass her. She turned back to see the old woman tumble across the table, scattering the little cards.

The room was emptied. They two were alone; she knew, without moving, horror and self-shame holding her there, that her poor friend was dead.

VIII

LOIS DRAKE

MISS LOIS DRAKE lived in one of the attics at the top of Hortons. That sounds poverty-struck and democratic, but as a matter of fact it was precisely the opposite.

The so-called "attics" at Hortons are amongst the very handsomest flats in London, their windows command some of the very best views, and the sloping roof that gives them their name does not slope enough to make them inconvenient, only enough to make them quaint.

Miss Drake was lucky, and asked Mr. Nix whether he had any flats to let on the very day that one of the attics was vacated. But then, Miss Drake was always lucky, as you could see quite well if you looked at her. She was a tall, slim girl, with dark brown hair, an imperious brow, and what her friends called a "bossy" mouth. It was, indeed, her character to be "bossy." Her father, that noted traveller and big-game hunter, had encouraged her to be "bossy"; the Drakes and the Bosanquets and the Mumpuses, all the good old county families with whom she was connected, encouraged her to be "bossy." Finally, the war had encouraged her to be "bossy." She had become in the early days of 1915 an officer in the "W.A.A.C." and since then she had risen to every

kind of distinction. She had done magnificently in France; had won medals and honours. No wonder she believed in herself. She was born to command other women; she had just that contempt for her sex and approval of herself necessary for command. She believed that women were greatly inferior to men; nevertheless, she was always indignant did men not fall down instantly and abase themselves before the women of whom she approved. "She bore herself as a queen," so her adoring friends said; quite frankly she considered herself one. The "W.A.A.C." uniform suited her; she liked stiff collars and short skirts and tight belts. She was full-breasted, had fine athletic limbs, her cheeks were flushed with health. Then the Armistice came, and somewhere in March she found herself demobilised. It was then that she took her attic at Hortons. Her father had died of dysentery in Egypt in 1915, and had left her amply provided for. Her mother, who was of no account, being only a Chipping-Basset and retiring by nature, lived at Dolles Hall, in Wiltshire, and troubled no one. Lois was the only child.

She could, then, spend her life as she pleased, and she soon discovered that there was plenty to do. Her nature had never been either modest or retiring; she had from the earliest possible age read everything that came her way, and five years at Morton House School, one year in Germany, and four months in East Africa with her father had left her, as she herself said, "with nothing about men that *she* didn't know."

The war took away her last reserves. She was a modern woman, and saw life steadily and saw it whole.

She also saw it entirely to her own advantage. The strongest element in her nature was, perhaps, her assured self-confidence in her management of human beings. She had, she would boast, never been known to fail with men or women. Her success in the war had been largely due to the fact that she had applied certain simple rules of her own to everybody alike, refusing to believe in individualities. "Men and women fall into two or three classes. You can tell in five minutes the class you're dealing with; then you act accordingly." Her chief theory about men was that "they liked to be treated as men." "They want you to be one of themselves." She adopted with them a masculine attitude that fitted her less naturally than she knew. She drank with them, smoked with them, told them rather "tall" stories, was never shocked by anything that they said, "gave them as good as they gave her."

After her demobilisation she danced a good deal, dined alone at restaurants with men whom she scarcely knew, went back to men's rooms after the theatre and had a "last whiskey," walked home alone after midnight and let herself into her "attic" with great satisfaction. She had the most complete contempt for girls who "could not look after themselves." "If girls got into trouble it was their own rotten fault."

She had developed during her time in France a masculine fashion of standing, sitting, talking, laughing. Nothing made her more indignant than that a man should offer her his seat in a Tube. How her haughty glance scorned him as she refused him! "It's an insult

to our sex," she would say. How she rejoiced in her freedom! "At last," she said, "there is sex equality. We can do what we like."

She was, however, not *quite* free. The war had left her a legacy in the person of an adoring girl friend, Margery Scales. Margery was an exact opposite to herself in every way—plump and soft and rosy and appealing and entirely feminine. She had been "under" Lois in France; from the first she had desperately adored her. It was an adoration without qualification. Lois was perfect, a queen, a goddess. Margery would die for her instantly if called upon; not that she wanted to die. She loved life, being pretty and healthy, and allowed by loving parents a great deal of freedom.

But what was life without Lois? Lois would tell you, if you asked her, that she had *made* Margery. "Margery owed her everything." Others, who did not like Lois, said that she had ruined Margery. Margery herself felt that life had simply not begun in those years before Lois had appeared.

Lois had determined that "after the war" she would finish the Margery affair. It unsettled her, disturbed her, refused to fall into line with all the straightforward arrangements that were as easy to manage as "putting your clothes on." The truth was, that Lois was fonder of Margery than she wanted to be. She quarrelled with her, scolded her, laughed at her, scorned her, and at the end of it all had absurdly soft and tender feelings for her that were not at all "sensible."

Margery's very helplessness—a quality that infuriated Lois in others—attracted and held her. She had

too much to do to bother about people's feelings; nevertheless, were Margery distressed and unhappy, Lois was uncomfortable and ill at ease. "After the war I'll break it off. . . . It's sentimental."

Nevertheless, here she was, four months, five months, six months after the Armistice, and it was not broken off. She would dismiss Margery with scorn, tell her that she could not be bothered with her scenes and tears and repentances, and then five minutes after she had expelled her she would want to know where she was, what she was doing.

She would not confess to herself the joy that she felt when Margery suddenly reappeared. Then, as she weeks went by, she began to wonder whether Margery were as completely under her control as she used to be. The girl seemed at times to criticise her. She said quite frankly that she hated some of the men whom Lois gathered round her in the attic.

"Well, you needn't come," said Lois; "I don't want you." Then, of course, Margery cried.

There was one occasion when Mr. Nix, the manager of the flat, very politely, and with the urbanity for which he was famous, warned her that there must not be so much noise at her evening parties. Lois was indignant. "I'll pack up and go. You'd think Nix was Queen Victoria." Nevertheless she did not pack up and go. She knew when she was comfortable. But deep down in her heart something warned her. Did she like all the men who now surrounded her? Was there not something in what Margery said? In France there had been work, heaps of it. Her organising gifts,

which were very real, had had full play there. The sense of the position that she had had unsettled her. She wanted to fill her life, to be still of importance, to be admired and sought after and talked of. Yet the men with whom she spent her time were not quite the right men, and sometimes that little voice of warning told her that they went too far, said things to her that they had no right to say, told stories. . . .

But did she not encourage them? Was not that what she wanted? Perfect equality now; no false prudery: the new world in which men and women stood shoulder to shoulder with no false reserves, no silly modesties. If Margery didn't like it, she could go. . . .

But she did not want Margery to go.

Then "Tubby" Grenfell came and the world was changed. Grenfell was nicknamed "Tubby" by his friends because he was round and plump and rosy-faced. Lois did not know it, but she liked him at once because of his resemblance to Margery. He was only a boy, twenty-one years of age, and the apple of his mother's eye. He had done magnificently in France, and now he had gone on to the Stock Exchange, where his uncle was a man of importance and power. He had the same rather helpless appealing innocence that Margery had had. He took life very seriously, but enjoyed it too, laughing a great deal and wanting to see and do everything. His *naïveté* touched Lois. She told him that she was going to be his elder brother. From the very first he had thought Lois perfectly wonderful, just as Margery had done. He received her dicta about life with the utmost gravity. He came and went just as

she told him. He "ate out of her hand," his friends told him.

"Well, I'm proud to," he said.

Unfortunately he and Margery disliked one another from the very beginning. That made difficulties for Lois, and she did not like difficulties.

"What you can see in him," said Margery, "I can't think. He's just the sort of man you despise. Of course he's been brave; but anyone can be brave. The other men laugh at him."

He had a good-natured contempt for Margery.

"It's jolly good of you to look after a girl like that," he said to Lois. "It's just your kindness. I don't know how you can bother."

Lois laughed at both of them, and arranged that they should meet as seldom as possible.

Hortons was soon haunted by "Tubby" Grenfell's presence.

"Peace Day" came and went, and Lois really felt that it was time that she "settled her life." Here was the summer before her; there were a number of places to which she might go and she could not make up her mind.

Firstly, she knew that some of the time must be spent with her mother in Wiltshire, and she was dreading this. Her mother never criticised her, never asked her questions, never made any demands, and Lois had rather enjoyed spending days of her "leave" in that silly old-fashioned company. But now? Could it be that Lois was two quite different people and that one half of her was jealous of the other half?

Moreover, there was now a complication about Scotland. "Tubby" had begged her to go to a certain house in Northumberland; nice people; people she knew enough to want to know them more. He begged her to go there during the very month that she had planned to go away with Margery. She knew quite well that if she tried to break the Scottish holiday that would be the end—Margery would leave her and never return. Well, was not that exactly what she had been desiring? Was she not feeling this animosity between "Tubby" and Margery a great nuisance? And yet—and yet—— She could not make up her mind to lose Margery; no, not yet. Her hatred of this individual (she had never been undecided in France; she had always known exactly what she intended to do) flung her, precipitately, into that final quarrel with Margery that, in reality, she wanted to avoid. It took place one morning in "the attic." It was a short and stormy scene. Lois began by suggesting that they should take their holiday during part of September instead of August, and that perhaps they would not go so far as Scotland. . . . What about the South Coast? Margery listened, the colour coming into her cheeks, her eyes filling with tears as they always did when she was excited.

"But we'd arranged——" she said in a kind of awe-struck whisper. "Months ago—we fixed——"

"I know, my dear," said Lois, with a carelessness that she by no means felt. "But what does it matter? September's as good as August, and I hate Scotland."

"You said you loved it before," said Margery slowly, staring as though she were a stranger who had brought

dramatic news. "I believe," she went on, "it's because you want to stay with Mr. Grenfell."

"If you want to know," cried Lois, suddenly urged on partly by her irritation at being judged, but still more by her anger at herself for feeling Margery's distress, "it is. You're impossible, Margery. You're so selfish. It can't make any difference to you, putting our holiday off. You're selfish. That's what it is."

Then a remarkable thing occurred. Margery did not burst into tears. Only all the colour drained from her face and her eyes fell.

"No, I don't think I'm selfish," said Margery; "I want you to enjoy yourself. You're tired of me, and I don't blame you. But I won't hang on to you. That *would* be selfish if I did. I think I'll go now. Besides," she added, "I think you're in love with Mr. Grenfell."

Suddenly, as Margery said the words, Lois knew that it was true. She was in love, and for the first time in her life. A great exultation and happiness filled her; for the first time for many months she was simple and natural and good. Her masculinity fell from her, leaving her her true self.

She came over to Margery, knelt down by her side, put her arms around her and kissed her. Margery returned the kiss, but did not surrender herself. Her body was stiff and unyielding. She withdrew herself from Lois and got up.

"I'm glad," she said, her voice trembling a little. "I hope you'll be very happy."

Lois looked at her with anxious eyes.

"But this doesn't make any difference to us," she said. "We can be the same friends as before—more than we were. You'll like 'Tubby,' Margery darling, when you know him. We'll have a great time—we three."

"No," said Margery, "this doesn't make any difference. That's quite true. The difference was made before."

"What do you mean?" asked Lois, standing up, her agitation strangely returning.

"You've been different," said Margery. "Since we came back from France, you've been changing all the time. It seemed right out there, your ordering everybody about. I admired it. You were fine. But now in London—I've no right to say so. But you're trying to do all the things men do; and it's—it's—beastly, somehow. It doesn't suit you. It isn't natural. I don't believe the men like it either, or at any rate not the nice men. I suppose it's silly, but I don't admire you any more, and if I don't admire you, I can't love you." With that last word she was gone, and Lois knew quite well that she would never come back again.

Lois stayed in the "attic" that morning in an odd confusion of mind. Margery was jealous, of course; that was what had made her say those things. Her discovery of her love for Grenfell filled her with joy, so that she could scarcely realise Margery; moreover the uncertainty that had been troubling her for months was over, but behind these feelings was a curious new sense of loss, a sense that she refused to face. Life without Margery—what would it be? But she turned

from that and, with joyful anticipation, thought of her new career.

She decided at once to dismiss Margery from her thoughts—not only partially, but altogether, so that no fragment of her should be left. That was her only way to be comfortable. She had on earlier occasions been forced to dismiss people thus absolutely; she had not found it difficult, and she had enjoyed in the doing of it a certain sense that she was finishing them, and that they would be sorry now for what they had done. But with Margery she saw that that would be difficult. Margery had been with her so long, had given her so much praise and encouragement, was associated in so many ways with so many places. She would return again and again, an obstinate ghost, slipping into scenes and thoughts where she should not be. Lois discovered herself watching the post, listening to the telephone, her heart beating at the sudden opening and shutting of a door . . . but Margery did not return.

She centred herself then absolutely around young Grenfell. She demanded of him twice what she had demanded before because Margery was gone. There was something feverish now in her possession of him. She was not contented and easy as she had been, but must have him absolutely. She was anxious that he should propose to her soon and end this period of doubt and discomfort. She knew, of course, that he would propose—it was merely a question of time—but there was something old-fashioned about him: a sort of *naïveté* which hindered him perhaps from coming forward too quickly.

She was not alone with him very much, because she thought it was good for him to see how other men admired her. She gathered around her more than before the men with whom she might be on thoroughly equal terms, as though in defiance of Margery's final taunt to her. It was as though she said to that perpetually interfering ghost: "Well, if you will come back and remind me, you shall see that you were wrong in what you said. Men do like me for the very things of which you disapproved . . . and they shall like me more and more."

She thought Grenfell understood that it was because of him that Margery had gone.

"She was jealous of you," she said, laughing. "I'm sure I don't know why she should have been. . . . You never liked one another, did you? Poor Margery! She's old-fashioned. She ought to have lived fifty years ago."

She was surprised when he said, "Did she dislike me? Of course we used to fight, but I didn't think it meant anything; I didn't dislike her. I'm so sorry you've quarrelled."

He seemed really concerned about it. One day he amazed her by saying that he'd seen Margery. They had met somewhere and had a talk. Lois's heart leapt.

"I'm ready to forgive her," she said, "for what she did. But of course things can never be quite the same again."

"Oh, she won't come back!" Grenfell said. "I begged her, but she said, 'No.' You weren't as you used to be."

At this Lois felt an unhappiness that surprised her by its vehemence. Then she put that away and was angry. "I don't want her back," she cried. "If she came and begged me I wouldn't have her."

But she felt that Grenfell had not reported truly. He was jealous of Margery, and did not want her to return. He seemed now at times to be a little restive under her domination; that only made her more dominating. She had scenes with him, all of them worked up by her. She arranged them because he was so sweet to her when they were reconciled. He was truly in despair if she were unhappy, and would do anything to make her comfortable again. Once they were engaged, she told herself, she would have no more scenes. She would be sure of him then. She was in a strange state of excitement and uncertainty; but then, these were uncertain and exciting times. No one seemed to know quite where they were, with strikes and dances and all the "classes" upside down. Although Lois believed that women should be just as men she resented it when Fanny, the portress, was rude to her. She had got into the way of giving Fanny little things to do; sending her messages, asking her to stamp letters, to wrap up parcels. Fanny was so willing that she would do anything for anybody; but the day came when Fanny frankly told her that she had not the time to carry messages. Her place was in the hall. She was very sorry. . . . Lois was indignant. What was the girl there for? She appealed to Grenfell. But he, in the charming, hesitating, courteous way that he had, was inclined to agree with Fanny. After all, the girl had her work

to do. She had to be in her place. At this little sign of rebellion Lois redoubled her efforts.

He must propose to her soon. She wished that he were not quite so diffident. She found here that this masculinity of hers hindered a little the opportunities of courtship. If you behaved just like a man, swore like a man, drank like a man, discussed any moral question like a man, scenes with sentiment and emotion were difficult. When you told a man a hundred times a day that you wanted him to treat you as he would a pal, it was perhaps irrational of you to expect him to kiss you. Men did not kiss men, nor did they bother to explain if they were rude or casual.

She had, however, a terrible shock one night when Conrad Hawke, a man whom she never liked, seeing her back to the "attic" after the theatre, tried to kiss her. She smacked his face. He was deeply indignant. "Why, you've been asking for it!" he cried. This horrified her, and she decided that Grenfell must propose to her immediately. This was the more necessary, because during the last week or two he had been less often to see her—and had been less at his ease with her. . . . She decided that he wanted to propose but had not the courage.

She planned then that on a certain evening the event should take place. There was to be a great boxing match at Olympia. Beckett was to fight Goddard for the heavyweight championship of Great Britain. She had never seen a boxing match. Grenfell should take her to this one.

When she suggested it he hesitated.

"I'd love us to go together, of course," he said. "All the same, I don't think I approve of women going to boxing matches."

"My dear 'Tubby,'" she cried; "what age do you think you're living in?"

"Well, I don't know," he said, looking at her doubtfully.

"If that isn't too absurd!" she cried. "Has there been a war or has there not? And have I been in France doing every kind of dirty work or not? Really, 'Tubby,' you might be Mother."

His chubby face coloured. His eyes were full of perplexity.

"Oh, of course, if you want to go, I'll take you," he said. "All the same, I'd rather not."

She insisted. The tickets were taken. She was determined that that night he should propose to her.

The great evening had arrived, and they had a little dinner at the Carlton Grill. Lois was wearing a dress of the very latest fashion—that is, a dress that showed all her back, that was cut very low in front, and that left her arms and shoulders quite bare. She seemed, as she sat at the table, to have almost nothing on at all. This, unfortunately, did not suit her. Her figure was magnificent, but the rough life in France had helped neither her skin nor her complexion. The upper part of her chest and her neck were sunburnt. Her arms were brown. She had taken much trouble with her hair, but it would not obey her now as it had done in the old days.

"I'm a fright," she had thought as she looked at her-

self in the glass. For a moment she thought she would wear one of her old less-revealing evening frocks. But no; she was worrying absurdly. All the women wore these dresses now. She would look a frump in that old dress. In colour the frock was a bright mauve. She was aware that all eyes followed her as she came into the grill room. She carried herself superbly, remembering how many girls—yes, and men too—had called her a queen. She saw at once that "Tubby" Grenfell was uneasy, and not his cheerful, innocent self. He seemed to have something that dragged his thoughts away from her. They both drank a good deal; soon they were laughing uproariously. . . .

They started off in a taxi for Olympia. The wine that she had drunk, the sense of the crisis that this night must bring to her, the beautiful air of this May evening, through which in their open taxi they were gliding, the whisper and the murmur of the Knightsbridge crowd—all these things excited her as she had never in all her life been excited before. Had she looked at herself she would have realised, from this excitement, the child that she really was.

She put her hand on "Tubby's" broad knee and drew a little closer to him. He talked to her eagerly, himself excited by the great event. He explained something of the fighting to her.

"There'll be a lot of 'in-fighting,'" he said; "there always is nowadays, they've caught it from America. You'll find that rather boring. But it isn't boring really. There's heaps of science in it; more than there used to be in the old boxing. They say that that's

where Beckett will be beaten—that he can't in-fight. I don't believe they're right, but we'll see. . . . That's what makes to-night so exciting. No one knows really what Beckett can do. He knocked out Wells too quickly, and he's improved so much that he's hardly the same man as he was before."

He chattered on, apparently now quite happy. What a dear he was! What a boy! How natural and good and simple! She felt maternal to him, as though he were her child. How happy they would be when they were married! how happy she would make him!

They drew near to Olympia. They were now in a great stream of cars and taxis. Crowds thronged the road. They got out and pushed their way along. The presence of the crowd thrilled Lois so that her eyes shone and her heart hammered. She clung to "Tubby's" strong arm. Soon they were through the gates, pushing up the Olympia steps, passing the turnstiles. What strange faces there were on all sides of her! She could not see another woman anywhere. She gathered her cloak more closely about her. They passed into the arena. For a moment she was dazzled by the light. The tiers of seats rose on every side of her, higher and higher. She followed "Tubby" meekly, feeling very small and insignificant. Soon they were seated close to the ring. Already men were boxing, but no one seemed to look at them. Everyone hurried to and fro; people were finding their seats. Around her, above her, beyond her, was a curious electrical hum of excitement, like the buzz of swarming bees. She herself felt so deeply moved that she was not far from

tears. She grew more accustomed to the place. She sat back in her chair, throwing her cloak behind her. "Tubby" talked to her in a low voice, explaining where everything was, who various celebrities were. There was Cochran; that was Eugene Corri; there was a famous actor; and so on. She began to be confident. She knew that men were looking at her. She liked them to look at her. She asked "Tubby" for a cigarette. Her eyes moved to the ring; she watched the boxing. She felt a renewed thrill at the sight of the men's splendid condition; and then, as she looked about her and saw the black cloud of men rising above and around her on every side, she could have clapped her hands with joy. Soon she was impatient of the boxing. She wanted the great event of the evening to begin. She felt as though she could not wait any longer, as though she must get up in her seat and call to them to come. She was aware then that "Tubby" was again uncomfortable. Was he distressed because men looked at her? Why should they not? Perhaps he did not think that she should smoke. Well, she *would* smoke. He was not her keeper.

The heat, the smoke, the stir, confused and bewildered her, but she liked the bewilderment. She was drunk with it—only this intense impatience for Beckett and Goddard to come was more than she could bear. "Oh, I do *wish* they'd come. . . . I do *wish* they'd come!" she sighed. Then, turning to "Tubby," she said: "Cheer up! What's the matter?"

"Oh, I'm all right." He moved uneasily. She fancied that he glanced with anger at a fat, black-haired,

be-ringed man near him who, as she already noticed, stared at her.

"Oh, I *do* wish they'd come!" she cried, speaking more loudly than she had intended. Some man near her heard her and laughed.

They came at last. The tall fellow was Goddard. The shorter man in the dull-coloured dressing-gown was Beckett. They walked about inside the ring; then they sat down and were hidden by a cloud of men with towels. A little man walked about the ring shouting something through a megaphone.

Lois could not hear what he said because of her own excitement. The ring was cleared; the fight had begun. The breathless silence that followed was almost more than she could bear. From the first moment she wanted Beckett to win. His grim seriousness fascinated her. The way that he stood crouching forward, his magnificent condition, the brown healthiness of his skin, appealed to her desperately. "I want him to win! I want him to win!" she repeated again and again to herself. He seemed to be having the best of it. Men shouted his name. The first round was over. In the pause of the interval she realised for a moment, as though she had come down from a great height, that the men near her were looking at her and smiling. She did not care; if only Beckett would win she cared for nothing. "The first round's Beckett's on points, anyway," she heard a man say near her. The ring was cleared again, the men moved cautiously, watching one another. Suddenly Beckett had sprung in. Before she could account to herself for what was happening God-

dard was on the floor. Men rose in their seats, shouting. The referee could be seen counting the seconds. Goddard was up. Then Beckett was in to him again—right, left, tuned like a piece of music. Goddard was down again, and this time he lay his full length without moving. The vast building seemed to rise like the personification of one exultant man and shout. Lois herself had risen; she was crying she knew not what, waving her programme. A man had leaped forward and kissed Beckett. Goddard was dragged by his seconds like a sack to his chair. The roar continued; men shouted and yelled and cheered. Lois sat down. It was over; Beckett had won. She had had her desire. She felt as though she had walked for miles and miles through thick, difficult country.

She could only see, over and over again those quick blows—right, left, like a piece of music. . . .

They sat there quietly for a little; then she said, "Let's go. I don't want to see any more after that."

Grenfell agreed.

Outside there was a strange peace and quiet. A large crowd waited, but it was silent. It was watching for Beckett.

The street was deliciously cool, and in the broad space beyond Olympia there was only a rumbling sibilant rustle that threaded the dusky trees. The stars shone in a sky of velvet. They found a taxi.

"I'll see you to your door," "Tubby" said.

During the drive very few words were spoken. Lois was concentrating now all her effort on the scene that was to come. She was quite certain of her victory;

she felt strong and sure with the confidence that the thrill of the fight had just given her. Above all, she loved Grenfell. It was the first time in her life that she had known love, and now that it had come she was wrapped in the wonder of it, stripped of all her artifices and conceits, as simply and naturally caught by it as any ignorant girl of her grandmother's day.

They were in Duke Street; the car stopped before Hortons.

Grenfell got out.

"Good-night," he said. "I'm so awfully glad you enjoyed it."

"No, you've got to come in. You have, really, 'Tubby.' It's very early—not ten yet. I'll make you some coffee."

He looked for a moment as though he would refuse. Then he nodded his head.

"All right," he said; "just for a bit." They went up in the lift superintended by young William, one of the Hortons officials, in age about fourteen, but dressed, with his oiled hair, high collar, and uniform, to be anything over twenty.

"Oh, sir, who won the fight?" he asked in a husky voice when he heard Lois make some allusion to Olympia.

"Beckett," said Grenfell.

"Gawd bless Joe," said young William piously.

The "attic" looked very comfortable and cosy. Grenfell sank into the long sofa. Lois made the coffee. It was as though Beckett's victory had also been hers. She felt as though she could not be defeated. When

she saw him sitting there so comfortably she felt as though they were already married.

She knew that there was something on his mind. She had seen, ever since they left Olympia, that there was something that he wanted to say to her. She could not doubt what it was. . . . She stood there smiling at him as he drank his coffee. How she loved him! Every hair of his round bullet-shaped head, his rosy cheeks, his strength and cleanliness, his shyness and honesty.

"Oh, I've just loved to-night!"

"I'm so glad you have," he answered.

Another long silence followed. He smoked, blowing rings and then breaking them with his finger. At last she spoke, smiling:

" 'Tubby,' you want to say something to me."

"Well——"

"Yes, you do, and I know what it is."

"You know?" He stared at her, confused and shy.

"Yes," she laughed. "Of course I do. I've known for weeks."

"For weeks? But you can't——"

"Oh, you think you can hide things—you can't!" She suddenly came over to him, knelt down by the sofa, putting her hand on his arm.

"You ridiculous baby! You're shy. You're afraid to tell me. But, thank Heaven, all that old-fashioned nonsense is over. I can tell you what you want to say without either of us being ashamed . . . 'Tubby,' darling . . . I know. I've known for weeks, and it's all right. I'll marry you to-morrow if you want me.

I've loved you since first I set eyes on you. Oh, 'Tubby,' we'll be so happy! We——"

But she was stopped by the look in his eyes. He had moved away; his face was crimson; his eyes wide with dismay. She knew at once that she had made a horrible mistake. He didn't love her. She rose; shame, misery, anger, self-contempt, all struggling together in her heart. She would have liked to speak. No words would come.

"Lois!" he said at last. "I'm awfully sorry. I didn't know you were going to say that, or I'd have stopped you. We're the greatest pals in the world, of course, but——"

"You don't want to marry me," Lois interrupted. "Of course. It's quite natural. I've made a bit of a fool of myself, 'Tubby.' You'd better say good-night and go."

He got up.

"Oh, Lois, I'm so sorry. . . . But I couldn't tell. I've had something else on my mind all these weeks—something that for the last three days I've been trying to tell you. Margery and I are engaged to be married."

That took the colour from her face. She stepped back, putting one hand on the mantelpiece to steady herself.

"Margery! . . . You! That stupid little idiot!"

There she made a mistake. He took her retort as a dog takes a douse of water, shaking his head resentfully.

"You mustn't say that, Lois. And after all, it was you that brought us together."

"I!" Her indignation as she turned on him was red-hot.

"Yes. I was sorry for her when you turned her off. I went to see her. We agreed about you from the beginning, and that was a bond."

"Agreed about me?"

"Yes. We thought it was such a pity that you went about with all these men. She told me how splendid you were in France. She had thought that I was in love with you, but I told her of course that I'd always thought of you as a man almost. Love was a different sort of thing. . . . Although to-night at the boxing you weren't a man, either. Anyway——"

She cut short his halting, confused explanation with contempt.

"You'd better go. You and Margery have treated me pretty badly between you. Good-night."

He tried to say something, but the sight of her furious eyes checked him. Without another word he went. The door closed; the room was suddenly intensely silent, as though it were waiting to hear the echo of his step.

She stood, fury, contempt, working in her face. Suddenly her eyes flooded with tears. Her brow puckered. She flung herself down on the floor beside the sofa, and burying her face in it cried, with complete abandonment, from her breaking heart.

IX

MR. NIX

MR. NIX, the manager of Hortons, had never been an analyser of the human character: it startled him, therefore, considerably, somewhere about March or April of 1919, to find himself deep in introspection.

What is deep to one may not be deep to another, and Mr. Nix's introspection amounted to little more than that he felt, as he found himself confiding to a friend one evening, as though he "were nothing more or less than a blooming juggler—one of those fellows, Joe, that tosses eight or ten balls in the air at a time. That's what I'm doing, positively."

"If you ask me," said his friend, "what you're doing, Sam, is thinking too much about yourself—being morbidly introspective, that's what you're being. I should drop it. That kind of thing grows."

"No, am I really?" said Mr. Nix, anxiously. "Upon my word, Joe, I believe you're right."

What Mr. Nix meant, however, when he said that he felt like a trick juggler, was literally true. He not only felt like it, he dreamt it. This dream was recurrent; he saw himself, dressed in purple tights, one foot on a rope, the other in mid-air, and tossing a dozen golden balls. Beneath him, far, far beneath him, was the saw-

dust ring, tiers of people rising to either side of it. The balls glittered and winked and tumbled in the fierce electric light. Always they returned to him as though drawn towards his stomach by a magnet, but always present with him was the desperate fear lest one should avoid and escape him. The sweat stood in beads on his forehead; the leg upon which everything depended began to tremble. The balls seemed to develop a wild individuality of their own: they winked at him, they sniggered. They danced and mocked and dazzled. He missed one, he missed two, three . . . the crowd beneath him began to shout . . . he swerved, he jolted, he was over, he was falling, the balls swinging in laughing derision about him . . . falling, falling. . . . He was awake.

This dream came to him so often that he consulted a doctor. The doctor consoled him, telling him that everyone was having bad dreams just now, that it was the natural reaction after the four years of stress and turmoil through which we have passed. "You yourself, Mr. Nix, have had your troubles I don't doubt?"

Yes, Mr. Nix had lost his only son.

"Ah, well, that is quite enough to account for it. Don't eat a heavy meal at night. Sleep lightly covered . . . plenty of fresh air."

This interview only confirmed Mr. Nix in his already deep conviction that all doctors were humbugs.

"The matter with me," he said to himself, "is just this, that I've got too much to do."

Nineteen hundred and nineteen was a very difficult year for anyone engaged in such business as Hortons.

That spontaneous hour or two of mirth and happiness on the morning of the Armistice had its origin in the general human belief that the troubles of those nightmare years were now over. At once, as though the Fairy Firkin had waved her wand, the world would be changed. The world *was* changed, but only because a new set of difficulties and problems had taken the place of the old ones, and these new troubles were in many ways harder to fight. That was a year of bafflement, bewilderment, disappointment, suspicion. Quite rightly so—but the justice of it could not be seen by the actors in it.

Mr. Nix was making a brave fight of it, just as throughout the war he had made a brave fight. He was a little man with a buoyant temperament, and no touch of morbidity. His boy's death had shocked him as an incredible event, but he had forbidden it to change the course of his life, and it remained deep down, unseen, a wound that never healed and was never examined.

His embarrassments—the balls with which he was forever a-juggling—were in the main four. First, the Directors in whose power the fate of Hortons and several other service flats lay. Secondly, Hortons itself, its servants, its tenants, the furniture, its food, its finances, its marriages, births, and deaths. Thirdly, his own private speculations, his little private business enterprises, his pals, his games, his vices, and his ambitions. Fourth, his wife, Nancy.

Those four "elements" had all been complicated enough before the war; it would take a man all his time,

he used to say, to deal with the Board—nice enough men, but peremptory in many ways, not understanding, and always in a hurry.

He had spent the best years of his life in persuading those men that Hortons was the best service flat in London; they did at length believe that; they were satisfied; but having brought them to such a height they must be maintained there. The war brought discontent, of course. Only the old men were active on the board, and the old men had always been the trying ones to deal with. The war, as it dragged its weary coils along, brought nerves and melodrama with it. Only Mr. Nix, it seemed, in all the world, was allowed to be neither nervous nor melodramatic. He must never show anger nor disappointment nor a sense of injustice . . . there were days he honestly confessed to Nancy, his wife, when he longed to pull some of those old white beards. . . .

But worse than those old men were the tenants of Hortons themselves. Here was a golden ball of truly stupendous heaviness and eccentricity. The things they had demanded, the wild, unnatural, impossible things! And the things that Hortons itself demanded! To Hortons the war was as nothing. It must be fed, clothed, cleaned, just as it had always been! You might shout to it about the prices, the laziness of workmen, the heaviness of taxation. It did not care. The spirit of Hortons must be maintained: it might as well not exist as be less than the fine creation it had always been.

As to the third of Mr. Nix's "elements," his private

life, that had dwindled until it was scarcely visible. He had no private life. He did not want to have one now that his son, who had been so deeply connected with it, was gone. Everything that he had done he had done for his son: that was his future. He did not look to the future now, but worked for the day, and rather to his own surprise, for Hortons, which had become a concrete figure, gay, debonair, autocratic. . . .

His personal life dropped. He saw little of his friends, never passed the doors of his club, sat at home in the evenings, reading first the *Times*, then the *Morning Post*, then the *Daily News*. He liked to have an all-round view of the situation.

It was his sense of Fair Play.

In this way the third wheel of his life infringed upon and influenced the fourth, his wife.

Mrs. Nix, whose maiden name had been Nancy Rolls, was "about" forty years of age. Even Mr. Nix was not quite sure how old she was: it was her way to exclaim, with her hearty, cheerful laugh: "We're all getting on, you know. There was a time when to be thirty seemed to be as good as dead. . . . Now that I'm over thirty. . . ." She was round, plump, red-faced, brown-haired, with beseeching eyes, and a little brown mole on the middle of her left cheek. She dressed just a little too smartly, with a little too much colour. Mr. Nix, himself attached to colour, did not notice this. He liked to see her gay. "Nancy's a real sport," was his favourite exclamation about her. He had married her when she was a "baby" seventeen years of age. They had been great "pals" ever since. Sentiment had

perhaps gone a little out of their relationship. They were both deeply sentimental people, but for some reason sentiment was the last thing that they evoked from one another. The death of their boy Lancelot should have brought them together emotionally, but their attitude had been, for so long, that of an almost masculine good cheer and good humour, that they bore their great sorrow individually. They had forgotten the language of emotion.

Mr. Nix, in the deep recesses of his soul, pondered over this. He wanted now to get closer to Nancy. He was sure that she felt "our Lance's" death quite desperately, but after the shock of the first month she put on her bright clothes again, and went about to the theatre and entertained her friends. "There's enough misery in the world without my trying to add to it," she would say. "I know some people think it's bad of me to wear these clothes, but it is what Lance would have liked."

As they sat in their cosy little flat, perched high on the top floor of Hortons, evening after evening, Mr. Nix with the paper, Mrs. Nix with a novel, they were both perhaps conscious that the boy's death had made a barrier, and as they lay side by side in their bed at night they were still more conscious of this. The darkness semed to strip from them that lively exterior life that they had developed. Mr. Nix would lie there and think about Nancy for hours. . . .

In the daytime indeed, his hands were full. The servants alone were problem enough for anybody. First, the men all went away to the war, and he had to have

women—women for everything, women for the kitchen, women for the hall, women valets. And then, just as he was getting used to them, the men began to come back—or rather, he had to get new men, men who must be taught their jobs, and learn his rules, and fall in with his ways.

Fortunately he was blessed with a wonderful portress, Fanny. Fanny, on whom, after a time, the whole great establishment seemed to hang. But what did Fanny do but become restless after the Armistice, fall a victim to a conscience which persuaded her that she was, by remaining, keeping a man out of his proper job, and, when he had persuaded her over that difficulty, what should she do then but become engaged to one of the valets, whom she presently married. Then the tenants of the flats were disturbed and agitated by the general unrest. Poor old Mr. Jay was so deeply agitated by the new world that he died of the shock of it, and as though that were not enough, old Miss Morganhurst went out of her mind, and died in a fit.

It became more and more difficult to secure the right kind of tenants. Hortons had always been a very expensive place, and only wealthy people could afford to live there. But how strange now the people who had money! A young man like the Hon. Clive Torby, representative of one of the finest families in England, found suddenly that he had not a penny in the world, and gaily took to house-painting, while on the other side of the shield there were people like the Boddingtons, who simply did not know how to behave, who,

wealthy though they were, should never have been in Hortons at all.

Then again, Mr. Nix was most seriously disturbed by the strange new interchanging of the sexes that seemed to have sprung up in this post-war England. "Positively," he said to his wife one evening, "all the men seem to be turning into women, and all the women into men." He read an article in some paper that lamented the rapidity with which women were abandoning all the mysteries that had made them once so charming. How thoroughly Mr. Nix agreed with the writer of the article! He read it all through to Mrs. Nix, who was entirely in accord with every word of it.

"The girls are nothing better than baggages," she declared; "that's my belief."

Hortons, its dignity, its traditions, its morality, was in danger. "I'll save it if I have to die for it," Nix declared.

As the weeks advanced his troubles extended. One strike followed another—coal, food, labour, clothes, all faltered, died, were revived again. Mr. Robsart, the famous novelist, his most eminent tenant, awoke early one morning to find a pipe leaking. His dining-room wall paper—a very beautiful and exclusive one—developed bright pink and purple spots. It was weeks before anything could be done. Mr. Robsart, who had been led by an excited female public to believe his personality to be one upon which the sun never set, said what he thought about this. The balls faltered in the air, their glittering surfaces menacing and threatening.

The tight-rope trembled; the crowd roared like angry beasts. . . . This dream was ruining Mr. Nix.

And through it all, like a refrain that set rhythm and measure to the rest, was the sense that he ought to do "something" for Mrs. Nix, that she was unhappy, but would not tell him about her unhappiness, that he should come closer to her, and did not know how.

Into this new troubled confusion of Mr. Nix's life came a figure. One day a young man who had known Lancelot in France came to see them. His name was Harry Harper. He was little more than a boy, was in the London Joint City and Midland Bank, and was as fresh and charming a lad as you would be likely to find anywhere. Mr. Nix liked him at once. In the first place, he had many new things to tell about Lance, and he told them in just the right way, with sentiment, but not too much, with humour a little, and with real appreciation of Lance's bravery, and his popularity with his men, and his charm with everyone.

Mrs. Nix sat there, on her bright red sofa, whilst young Harper told his tale, and her face was as red as the furniture. The tears glittered in her eyes, but they did not fall. Her plump hands were locked lightly on her lap. She stared before her as though she were seeing straight through into the horrors of that terrible No Man's Land, where her boy had faced the best and the worst and made his choice.

"He was always a good boy," she said at last. "You will understand, Mr. Harper, I'm sure. From his very cradle he was good. He never cried like other babies and made a fuss. Of course, as he grew older he had

a little of the devil in him, as one might say. I'm sure no mother would have it otherwise. But—Oh! he *was* a good boy!"

"There, there, mother," said Mr. Nix, patting her soft shoulder. "I'm sure it's very good of you, Mr. Harper, to come and tell us all this. You can understand that we appreciate it."

Young Harper took it all the right way. His tact was wonderful for a boy of his years. Mr. Nix, who, like most Englishmen, was a deep-dyed sentimentalist without knowing it, loved the boy.

"You come and see us whenever you like. We're in most evenings. You'll always be welcome." Harper availed himself of the invitation and came very often. He was leading, it seemed, a lonely life. His parents lived in Newcastle and they had many children. His lodgings were far away in Pimlico, and he had few friends in London. Before a month had passed he was occupying a little spare bedroom in the Nix quarters—a very little bedroom, but wonderful for him, he declared, being so marvellously in the centre of London. "You've given me a home," he cried; "can't thank you enough. You don't know what Pimlico can be for a fellow!"

As the days passed Mr. Nix was more and more delighted with the arrangement. Mrs. Nix had a way of going to bed early and Mr. Nix and Harry would sit up talking. Mr. Nix looked forward to those evenings. He had, he discovered, been wanting someone with whom he might talk, and clear his ideas a bit. Harry, although he was so young, had really thought

very deeply. Mr. Nix, whose thinking was rather of an amateur kind, very quickly forgot the difference between their years. Harry and he talked as man to man. If anything, Harry was perhaps the older of the two. . . .

Mr. Nix found that it helped him very much when Harry talked. He did not seem to be balancing so many balls in mid-air when Harry was sharing his difficulties.

The boy had, too, a charm. His air of asking Mr. Nix's advice, as a man of the world. That was what Mr. Nix liked to be considered, and he told Harry many sensible things, especially about women.

"Don't let them catch you," was the burden of his opinion. "They are the devil for getting hold of a man before he knows where he is. Play with them, but don't take them seriously, until the right one comes along. You'll know it as soon as she does. So much wiser to wait. But they're clever . . . damned clever. . . ."

"You're right, sir," said Harry. "Ab-so-lute-ly: I remember a girl once——"

He plunged into reminiscence. Finally, however, he declared that he didn't care very much about women. He meant to lead his life apart from them. He'd watched other fellows and he knew the mess they could get into. . . .. Especially married women. . . .

"Ah! married women!" repeated Mr. Nix with a sigh. There wasn't much that he didn't know about married women. It was terrible the way that they

were kicking over the traces these days. Really stopped at nothing. Why, he remembered a married woman . . .

Then Harry remembered a married woman . . .

Then Mr. Nix remembered still another married woman.

This led quite naturally to certain disclosures about Mrs. Nix. Mr. Nix had indeed reasons to be thankful. *There* was a woman who was corrupted by none of these modern ideas.

She was no prude, she knew her world, but she believed in the good old rules—"One man for one woman."

"It's been a bit lonely for her," Mr. Nix continued, "since Lancelot went, and it's a bit difficult to make her happy. I'm so busy all day, you see. Takes the whole of a man's time to run a place like this nowadays, I can tell you. Be nice to her, Harry. See as much of her as you can. She likes you."

"Indeed, I will," said Harry fervently. "You two are the first real friends I've ever had. I'm grateful, I can tell you."

Now, strangely enough, the more Mr. Nix thought of his wife, the more seriously and earnestly he puzzled as to the right way to bring her close to him, and make her happy, the less he seemed to realise her. There comes, perhaps, that moment in most married lives when the intimacy of years has thickened the personalities of man and wife so deeply with custom and habit that the real individualities can no longer be discerned. Something of the kind came now to

Mr. Nix. The more he attempted to draw closer to Nancy, the more he realised that he was hearing a voice, watching a physical form, having physical contact, but dealing with shadows. He knew so precisely her every movement, her laugh, the way that she caught her breath when she was agitated, the touch of her step on the carpet, that she was no longer a person at all. She was part of himself, perhaps, but a part of himself that he could not treat with his imagination. He had not known before that he had an imagination. The war had given it birth and now it was growing, demanding food, living, thrusting, experiencing, leading its master into many queer places—but neglecting altogether Mrs. Nix.

He found himself, as he sat in his little office downstairs, positively trying to force himself to realise what his wife was like. She had bright yellow hair, a rosy face, a plump figure; she wore two rings, one with a ruby stone, another a pearl. She was marvellously young for her age. . . . She . . .

Then, when with a start of surprise he realised what he was doing, he wondered positively whether he were not going mad. He buried himself more and more in the work of the place, of the office, fighting to keep everything straight and proper, realising, although he was frightened to admit it, that Hortons was more vivid to him than anything or anybody else.

Except Harry! "Thank God that boy's here," he thought. "I don't know what we'd do without him. That *was* a piece of luck for us."

He lay on his bed staring up into the dark ceiling;

were kicking over the traces these days. Really stopped at nothing. Why, he remembered a married woman. . . .

Then Harry remembered a married woman. . . .

Then Mr. Nix remembered still another married woman.

This led quite naturally to certain disclosures about Mrs. Nix. Mr. Nix had indeed reasons to be thankful. *There* was a woman who was corrupted by none of these modern ideas.

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amazement, he received a very polite letter from the Secretary of the Board, saying that the Directors were thoroughly satisfied with him and had no complaints.

He went on during that month from struggle to struggle. He forgot Harry; he puzzled no longer about Mrs. Nix. He was so tired when night came that he slept the sleep of a drugged man. He no longer saw the dancing balls. He was invigorated, uplifted, desperately excited. He found in himself a capacity for organisation that he had never suspected. He discovered that it delighted him to meet and to conquer his servants. He saw in their eyes, and he was delighted to see it, their own astonishment at this new character that he was developing. He browbeat them, told them to go, showed them that they had better stay, held them together and forced them to content. They were afraid of him. By Jove!—They were afraid of him! He looked at himself in the glass. He blessed the crisis that had shown him in his true colours. He contemplated the life of Napoleon. . . .

He went out, and with his own right arm fetched in sulky and wage-demanding workmen. He talked to them and found that there was a great deal to be said on their side.

He began to discover that strange truth that almost everyone was discovering just at this time—namely, that when you read the papers or thought of your fellow human beings in the mass, you hated and despised them, but that, if you talked to any individual, man or woman, you liked and understood them.

Pride grew in his heart, and happiness and contentment.

By the middle of July Hortons was itself again. The crisis was over. Prices were impossible, labour rebellious, the world topsy-turvy, but Hortons was at peace. He sighed, put back his shoulders, patted his little stomach appreciatively, loved all the world and, once again, considered Mrs. Nix.

He would give her now all his time. He would take her out; make her presents; they should have a splendid new life together.

He came back one evening after a successful meeting with the Board, opened his little hall door, hung up his coat, whistling to himself, opened his drawing-room door, saw Mrs. Nix on the red sofa, enveloped in the arms of Harry, who was kissing her ears, her eyes, her mouth.

He saw this, and then he saw the neat little sitting-room sway and heave. A bright blue vase, holding yellow sprays of some dried flower, raced towards him across the mantelpiece, and he stepped back, putting his hand on to a chair behind him to avoid its contact. The room steadied itself and he realised that he felt sick. He put up his hand to his mouth. Then every sensation was swallowed up by a mad, violent anger, an anger that seemed to increase with every wild beat of his heart, as though that heart were, of its own purpose, pounding him on to some desperate act.

Behind his anger he saw the two faces. Nancy was sitting square on the sofa, her hands spread out, plunging deep into the red stuff of the sofa. Harry was

standing, his face white, his eyes bewildered and defiant.

"You might at least have locked the door," Mr. Nix said, whispering.

His knees trembled so that he suddenly sat down and stared across at them.

"Why didn't you lock the door?" he repeated. "You knew I'd be coming back."

"Look here . . ." Harry began. He stopped, took a pull at himself, straightened his back, stood instinctively as though he were obeying orders—"I love your wife. I've loved her for weeks. Of course, it's all my fault. She doesn't care for me in that way. She's just lonely, that's all."

"Lonely!" said Mr. Nix.

"Yes—lonely! You don't know that you've been neglecting her all this time, do you? But you have! And it's your own fault, all this. Nothing's happened. She'd never deceive you. She's too good for that. But it would be your own fault if she did. . . . Not that I'm not a cad. Of course I am, coming in and your being such a friend to me and then behaving like this. I'm a cad all right, but you're to blame too. She's the only one who hasn't done any wrong."

Where had Mr. Nix heard all this before? He'd seen it on the stage. Just like this. Exactly. Nevertheless, his anger mounted. He saw the room coloured crimson. He suddenly bounded from his chair and rushed at Harry. He tried to hit him in the face. There was a most ludicrous struggle. The two hot faces were suddenly close to one another. Then a

chair fell with a crash, and, as though the noise made both men feel the absurdity of their situation, they withdrew from one another and stood there glaring. . . .

Mr. Nix hated that he should be trembling as he was. Every part of him was shaking, and he was so conscious of this that he wanted to escape and return only when he was calmer.

"Very well . . ." he said. "Of course, I know what to do. I hope that I shall never see either of you again."

"One moment." It was his wife's voice, and he turned round surprised that it should sound just as it had always sounded.

That was pathetic, and there was an impulse in him, that he instantly fiercely defeated, to go to her and take her hand.

"One moment," she repeated. "I've got something to say to this." She rose and stood, her hands moving nervously against her dress, her eyes staring straight into her husband's face. "It's quite right that I was kissing Harry, but it isn't right that I love him. I don't love him a bit. I don't love anybody. I'm just sick of men. I've been sick of them a long time. It was just because I didn't feel Harry was a man at all that I let him kiss me. A dog or a baby would have done just as well. . . . I don't care what you do. You can turn me out. I want to be turned out. I want to be free, I want to be with women, and work on my own, and do sensible things, and have my own life with no men in it. . . . No men in it anywhere.

I've been wanting this for years; ever since the war started. The world's just run for men and you think you're so important that you're *everything*. But you're not. Not to a woman of my age who's been through it all, and hasn't children. What have I been sitting at home for, waiting for you, seeing after your food, keeping you in a good temper, looking after you? Why should I? I'm myself—not half of you. And Harry too. He was a nice boy at first. But suddenly he wants me to love him, to belong to him, to follow him. Why should I, a boy like that? I want to be with other women, women who understand me, women who know how I feel, women who have their own world and their own life, and are independent of men altogether. . . . I've wanted to go for months—and now I'm going."

She moved towards the door. The absurdity of what she had said kept him standing there in front of her. She wanted only women! Oh, of course, that was only bluff, put up to carry off a difficult situation.

People did not *want* their own sex—a man for a woman, a woman for a man. That was the way the world went, and it was right that it should be so.

Nevertheless, her words had had behind them a strange ring of conviction. He stared at her in his round, puzzled, solid way. He did not move from where he was, and she could not reach the door without brushing against him, so she also stayed.

Another mood came to her. "Oh! I'm so sorry . . ." she said. "I've done very wrong to hurt you. You've always done your very best, but it was over

—you and I—so long ago. Long, long before Lance was killed!"

"Over?" he repeated.

"Yes, over—men never know unless it's worth some woman's while to tell them."

Harry's voice broke in.

"I'd better go. . . . I ought to . . . I mustn't . . ." He murmured something more, but they neither of them noticed him. They were intent upon one another. He left the room.

Mr. Nix stared desolately around him. "I don't know what to do," he repeated to himself. "I don't know what to do."

She sighed as she might have done with a child who was trying her.

"We've both got to think it out," she said. "I'm glad now that it's happened. It ends all that falseness. I'll talk it over with you as long as you like."

She moved forward; he stood aside and she left the room. He sat down on the red sofa and stayed there, until late into the night, trying to puzzle out his position. Sometimes, in his distress, he spoke to himself aloud.

"That's what it is . . . the world's changed. Entirely changed. Women don't want men any more. But that's awful! They can't get on alone. Nancy can't get on alone. She thinks she can, but she can't. She gets taken in by the first silly boy that comes along. I believe she cares for Harry more than she said. . . . She must. . . . She wouldn't have let him kiss her. . . ."

And that was the first thing that he found in the voyage of mental discovery that he was now making —namely, that he couldn't be jealous of Harry if he tried. His anger had left him. There was nothing in that. He knew it absolutely. Nancy had spoken the truth when she had said that she didn't care for that boy any more than for a dog or a baby. No, he felt no jealousy, and now, oddly enough, no anger.

But he did not know how he felt. He did not know what to do. Again he saw the golden balls tossing in the air above him, and there was she, alluring, glittering, tumbling, escaping.

He thought, with a smile of contempt, of his conquest of Hortons. That was no achievement. But this, this new woman, this new Nancy, here was something.

He slept that night on the sofa, taking off his coat and wrapping a rug around him. He slept the slumber of the dead.

Next day they had only one talk together, and that a very little one. Suddenly after breakfast she turned round upon him.

"Well," she said, "what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he answered, and then because he felt that she would despise him for being so indeterminate, he went on, "It doesn't matter about Harry. I was only angry for a moment seeing you together like that. I know that you don't care for him. It was what you said afterwards—about not caring for me any more. Did you mean that?"

"Why no," she answered, "I never said that. Of course I care for you. How could it be otherwise

after all these years? But I don't want to give up my whole life to you any more. I don't love you. I haven't loved you for years. I think Lance took all the love I had after he was born. And so I don't want to be always with you. Why should I be? Men when they are friends aren't always together. I want to be free, to do some of the things independent women are doing. There are so many things women can do now. I see no reason for our staying always together. I don't want to stay with anyone always."

"Then you don't love me any more?"

"No, of course I don't—and you don't love me. You know that. For ever so long now you haven't felt anything about me at all. You've pretended to because you thought it was right, but I've been a shadow to you."

She was so right that he could only stare dumbly at her wisdom.

"You're not a shadow any longer," he said.

She laughed.

"That's only because we've just had a scene. I shall be a shadow again in a day or two."

They waited. At last he said, "Well, you won't go at once, will you? Please, promise me that. Stay until we've straightened everything out. Promise me."

She shook her head.

"No, I'll promise nothing any more. I should only break my promises. But I'll tell you before I'm going."

There began then for him the strangest time.

Slowly an entirely new woman stole into his life, a woman whom he did not know at all, a creation as strange and novel as though he had but now met her for the first time. Every evening, when he returned to the flat, it was with the expectation of finding her gone. He questioned her about nothing. She continued as she had done before to look after the flat and his clothes and his food. He did not touch her; he did not kiss her. They sat in the evening in their little sitting-room reading. They discussed the events of the day.

Soon he realised that it was beginning to be a passionate determination with him that he must keep her. He did not know how to set about it. He found that he was beginning to woo her again, to woo her as he had never wooed anybody before. He did not let her see it. He fancied that he was the last word in tact. One evening he brought her some roses. He tried to speak casually about it. His voice trembled. One night he kissed her, but very indifferently as though he were thinking of other things.

And how mysterious she was becoming to him! Not in the old way. He could not believe that there had ever been a time when he had known her so well that he could not see her. He saw her continually now, through all his work, through every moment of the day. His heart beat when he thought of her. He would wait for a moment outside the door in the evening, his hands trembling with the thought that he might look inside and find her gone.

He never questioned her now as to where she went,

but he was forced to admit that she did not go out any more than she had done in the old days. It was strange when you came to think of it, that she had not followed up more completely her fine declaration of independence.

They went one evening to a theatre, together. They sat close to one another in the dark, and he longed to take her hand, but did not dare. He felt like a boy again, and she was surely young too—younger than he had ever known her.

There were times when he fancied that after all she was quite contented with her domesticity. But he did not dare to believe that. If he once caught the golden ball and held it, what would happen?

There came at last an evening when imprudence overcame him. He caught her in his arms and kissed her—kissed her as he had not done for years. The first wonderful thing that he knew was that she responded, responded with all the passion of their first days of courtship.

He heard her murmur:

"Poor old Sam—you poor, blind, silly old Sam."

A moment later she was out of his arms and across the floor.

"But don't imagine," she cried, "that I'm sure that I'm going to stay. I may be off at any minute. This very night perhaps!"

He was alone staring at the closed door. The golden balls were still dancing. He wanted to follow her. He got up. He stopped. He had a moment of intense disappointment.

Then—"By Jove, I believe I'm glad. I don't want to be sure of her. I hope I'll never be sure of her again!"

And on that flash of self-realisation he began his new life.

X

LIZZIE RAND

LIZZIE RAND was just forty-six years of age when old Mrs. Roughton McKenzie died leaving her all her money. Months later she had not thoroughly realised what had happened to her.

Until that day of Mrs. McKenzie's death she had never had any money. She had spent her life, her energies, her pluck and her humour in the service of one human being after another, and generally in the service of women. It seemed to her to be really funny that the one who had during her life begrudged her most should in the end be the one who had given her everything; but no one had ever understood old Mrs. McKenzie, and as likely as not she had left her money to Lizzie Rand just to spite her numerous relations. Lizzie had expected nothing. She never did expect anything, which was as well perhaps, because no one ever gave her anything. She was not a person to whom one naturally gave things; she had a pride, a reserve, an assertion of her own private liberty that kept people away and forbade intimacy. That had not always been so. In the long ago days when she had been Adela Beaminster's secretary she had given herself. She had loved a man who had not loved her, and out of the shock of that she had won a friendship

with another woman, which was still perhaps the most precious thing that she had. But that same shock had been enough for her. She guarded, with an almost bitter ferocity, the purity and liberty of her soul.

All the women whose secretaries she had afterwards been had felt this in her, and most of them had resented it. Old Mrs. McKenzie had resented it more than any of them. She was a selfish, painted, over-decorated old creature, a widow with no children and only nephews and nieces to sigh after her wealth. One of Lizzie's chief duties had been to keep these nephews and nieces from the door, and this she had done with a certain grim austerity, finding that none of them cared for the aunt and all for the money. The outraged relations decided, of course, at once that she was a plotting, despicable creature; it is doing her less than justice to say that the idea that the money would be left to her never for a single instant entered her head. Mrs. McKenzie taunted her once for expecting it.

"Of course you're waiting," she said, "like all of them, to pick the bones of the corpse."

Lizzie Rand laughed.

"Now is that like me?" she asked. "And, more important, is it like you?"

Mrs. McKenzie sniggered her tinkling, wheezy snigger. There was a certain honesty between them. They had certain things in common.

"I don't like you," she said. "I don't see how anyone could. You're too self-sufficient—but you certainly have a sense of humour."

There had been a time once when many people liked Lizzie, and she reflected now, with a little shudder, that perhaps only one person in the world, Rachel Seddon, the woman friend before-mentioned, liked and understood her. Why had she shut herself off? Why presented so stiff, so immaculate, so cold a personality to the world? She was not stiff, not cold, not immaculate. It was, perhaps, simply that she felt that it was in that way only that she could get her work done, and to do her work thoroughly seemed to her now to be the job best worth while in life.

During the war she had almost broken from her secretaryship and gone forth to do Red Cross work or anything that would help. A kind of timidity that had grown upon her with the years, a sense of her age and of her loneliness, held her back. Twenty years ago she would have gone with the first. Now she stayed with Mrs. McKenzie.

Mrs. McKenzie died on the day of the Armistice, November 11, 1918. Her illness had not been severe. Lizzie had had, at the most, only a week's nursing; it had been obvious from the first that nothing could save the old lady. Mrs. McKenzie had not looked as though she were especially anxious that anything should save her. She had lain there in scornful silence, asking for nothing, complaining of nothing, despising everything. Lizzie admitted that the old woman died game.

There had followed then that hard, bewildering period that Lizzie knew by now so well where she must pull herself, so reluctantly, so heavily towards the busi-

ness of finding a new engagement. She did not, of course, expect Mrs. McKenzie to leave her a single penny. She stayed for a week or two with her friend Rachel Seddon. But Rachel, a widow with an only son, was so tumultuously glad at the return of her boy, safe and whole, from the war, that it was difficult for her just then to take any other human being into her heart. She loved Lizzie, and would do anything in the world for her; she was indeed for ever urging her to give up these sterile companionships and secretaryships and come and make her home with her. But Lizzie, this time, felt her isolation as she had never done before.

"I'm getting old," she thought. "And I'm drifting off . . . soon I shall be utterly alone." The thought sent little shivering ghosts climbing about her body. She saw in the gay, happy, careless, kindly eyes of young Tom Seddon how old she was to the new generation.

He called her "Aunt Liz," took her to the theatre, and was an angel . . . nevertheless an angel happily, almost boastfully, secure in another, warmer planet than hers.

Then came the shock. Mrs. McKenzie had left her everything—the equivalent of about eight thousand pounds a year.

At first her sense was one of an urgent need of rest. She sank back amongst the cushions and pillows of Rachel's house and refused to think . . . refused to think at all. . . . She considered for a moment the

infuriated faces of the McKenzie relations. Then they, too, passed from her consciousness.

When she faced the world again, she faced it with the old common sense that had always been her most prominent characteristic. She had eight thousand a year. Well, she would do the very best with it that she could. Rachel, who had appeared to be more deeply excited than she over the event, had various suggestions to offer, but Lizzie had her own ideas. She could not remember the time when she had not planned what she would do when somebody left her money.

She took one of the most charming flats in Hortons, bought beautiful things for it, etchings by D. T. Cameron, one Nevinson, and a John drawing, some Japanese prints; she had books and soft carpets and flowers and a piano; and had the prettiest spare room for a friend. Then she stopped and looked about her. There were certain charities in which she had been always deeply interested, especially one for Poor Gentlewomen. There was a home, too, for illegitimate babies. She remembered, with a happy irony, the occasion when she had tried to persuade Mrs. McKenzie to give something to these charities and had failed. . . . Well, Mrs. McKenzie was giving now all right. Lizzie hoped that she knew it.

There accumulated around her all the business that clusters about an independent woman with means. She was on committees; many people who would not have looked twice at her before liked her now and asked her to their houses.

Again she stopped and looked about her.

Still there was something that she needed. What was it? Companionship? More than that. Affection, a centre to her life; someone who needed her, someone to whom she was of more importance than anyone else in the world. Even a dog. . . .

She was forty-six. Without being plain she was too slight, too hard-drawn, too masculine, above all too old to be attractive to men. An old maid of forty-six. She faced the truth. She gave little dinner-parties, and felt more lonely than ever. Even it seemed there was nobody who wanted to make her a confidante. People wanted her money, but herself not at all. She was not good conversationally. She said sharp sarcastic things that frightened people. People did not want the truth; they wanted things to be wrapped up first, as her mother and sister had wanted them years ago.

She was a failure socially, in spite of her money. She could not be genial, and yet her heart ached for love.

At this moment Mr. Edmund Lapsley appeared. Lizzie met him at a party given by Mrs. Philip Mark in Bryanston Square. Mrs. Mark was an old friend of Rachel's, a kindly and clever woman with an ambitious husband who would never get very far.

Her parties were always formed by a strange mixture dictated first by her kind heart and second her desire to have people in her house who might possibly help her husband. Edmund Lapsley originated in the former of these impulses. He was not much to look at—long, lanky, with a high bony head, a prominent Roman nose and large, cracking fingers. He was shabbily dressed, awkward in his manner, and apprehensive.

It was his eyes that first attracted Lizzie's attention. They were beautiful large brown eyes, with the expression of a lost and lonely dog seated deep in their pupils. He sat with Lizzie in a corner of the crowded drawing-room to arrange his long legs so that they should not be in the way, cracked his long fingers together and endeavoured to be interested in the people whom Lizzie pointed out to him.

"That's Henry Trenchard," Lizzie said, "that wild-looking boy with the untidy hair. . . . He's very clever. Going to be our great novelist. . . . That's his sister, Millie. Mrs. Mark's sister, too. Isn't she pretty? She's the loveliest of the family. That stout clergyman is a Trenchard cousin. They all hang together in the most wonderful way, you know. His wife ran away and never came back again. I don't think I wonder; he looks heavy. . . ." And so on.

Lizzie wondered to herself why she bothered. It was not her habit to gossip, and Mr. Lapsley was obviously not at all interested.

"I beg your pardon," she said; "you don't want to know who these people are."

"No," he said in a strange, sudden, desperate whisper. "I don't. I lost my wife only three months ago. I'm trying to go out into the world again. I can't. It doesn't do any good." He gripped his knee with one of his large bony hands.

"I'm so sorry," Lizzie said. "I didn't know. How tiresome of me to have gone on chattering like that! You should have stopped me."

He seemed himself to be surprised at the confession

that he had made. He stared at her in a bewildered fashion like an owl suddenly flashed into light. He stared, saying nothing. Suddenly in the same hurried, husky whisper he went on: "Do you mind my talking to you? I want to talk to somebody. I'd like to tell you about her."

"Please," said Lizzie, looking into his eyes, they were tender and beautiful, so unlike his ugly body, and full of unhappiness.

He talked; the words tumbled out in an urgent, tremulous confusion.

They had been married, it appeared, ten years, ten wonderful happy years. "How she can have cared for me, that's what I never understood, Miss—Miss——"

"Rand," said Lizzie.

"I beg your pardon. Difficult to catch . . . when you are introduced. . . . Never understood. I was years older than she. I'm fifty now—forty when I married her, and she was only twenty. Thirty when she —when she died. In childbirth it was. The child, a boy, was born dead. Everyone prophesied disaster. They all told her not to marry me, she was so pretty, and so young, and so brilliant. She sang, Miss Rand, just like a lark. She did, indeed. She was trained in Paris. I oughtn't to have proposed to her, I suppose. That's what I tell myself now, but I was carried off my feet, completely off my feet. I couldn't help myself at all. I loved her from the first moment that I saw her. You know how those things are, Miss Rand. And, in any case, I don't know. Ten perfect years, that's a good deal for anyone to have, isn't it? And she

was as happy as I was. It may seem strange to you, looking at me, but it was really so. She thought I was so much cleverer than I was—and better too. It used to make me very nervous sometimes lest she should find me out, you know, and leave me. I always expected that to happen. But she was so charitable to everyone. Never could see the bad side of people, and they were always better with her than with anyone else. We'd always hoped for a child, and then, as the years went on, we gave it up. Edmund, she said to me, we must make it up to one another. And then she told me it was going to be all right. You wouldn't have believed two ordinary people could be so happy as we were when we knew about it. We made many plans, of course. I was a little apprehensive that I'd be rather old to bring up a child, but she was so young that made it all right —so wonderfully young. . . . Then she died. It was incredible, of course. I didn't believe it . . . I don't believe it now. She's not dead. That's absurd. You'd feel the same if you'd seen her, Miss Rand. So full of life, and then suddenly . . . nothing at all. It's impossible. Nature isn't like that. Things gradually die, don't they, and change into something else. Not suddenly. . . ."

He broke off. He was clutching his knees and staring in front of him. "I don't know why I talk to you like this, Miss Rand . . . I hope you'll forgive me. I shouldn't have bothered you."

"I'm pleased that you have, Mr. Lapsley." She got up. She felt that he would be glad now to escape. "Won't you come and see me? I have a flat in Hortons

Chambers in Duke Street, No. 42. . . . Do come. Just telephone."

He looked up at her, not rising from his seat. Then he got up.

"I will," he said. "Thank you."

He was still staring at her, and she knew that he had something further to say. She could see it struggling in his eyes. But she did not want him to confess any more. He would be the kind of man to regret afterwards what he had done. She would not burden his conscience. And yet she had the knowledge that it was something very serious that he wanted to tell her, something that had been, in reality, at the back of all his earlier confession.

She refused the appeal in his eyes, said good-night, took his hand for a moment and turned away.

Afterwards she was talking to Katherine Mark.

"I see you were kind to poor Mr. Lapsley," Katherine said.

"How sad about his wife!" Lizzie answered.

"Yes. And she really was young and beautiful. No one understood why she married him, but I've never seen anything more successful. . . . I didn't think he'd come to-night, but I'm fond of him. Philip doesn't care for him much, but he reminds me of a cousin of ours, John Trenchard, who was killed in Russia in the second year of the war. But John was unhappier than Mr. Lapsley. He never had his perfect years."

"Yes, that's something," Lizzie acknowledged.

It was strange to her afterwards that Edmund Lapsley should persist so vividly in her mind. She saw

him with absolute clarity almost as though he were with her in her flat. She thought of him a good deal. He needed someone to comfort him, and she needed someone to comfort. She hoped he would come and see her.

He did come, one afternoon, quite unexpectedly and without telephoning first. Fortunately she was there, alone, and wanting someone to talk to. At first he was shy and self-conscious. They talked stiffly about London, and the weather, and the approaching Peace, and whether there would ever be a League of Nations, and how high prices were, and how impossible it was to get servants and when they got them they went. . . . Lizzie broke ruthlessly in upon this. "It isn't the least little good, Mr. Lapsley," she said, "our talking like this. It's mere waste of time. We both know plenty of people to whom we can chatter this nonsense. Either we are friends, or we are not. If we are friends, we must go a little further. Are we friends?"

He seemed to be at a loss. He blinked at her.

"Yes," he said.

"Well, then," she looked at him and smiled. "I don't want to force your confidence, but there was something that you were anxious to tell me about the other night, some way in which I could help you. I stopped you then, but I don't want to stop you now. I'll be honoured indeed if there's anything I can do."

He gulped, stammered, then out it came. At the first hint of his trouble it was all that Lizzie could do to repress an impatient gesture. His trouble was—spiritualism.

Of all the tiresome things, of all the things about

which she had no patience at all, of all the idiotic, money-wasting imbecilities! He poured it all out. He had read books, at last a friend had taken him . . . A Dr. Orloff, a very wonderful medium, a very trustworthy man, a man about whom there could be no question.

On the first occasion the results had been poor—on the second occasion his Margaret had spoken to him, actually spoken to him. Oh! but there could be no doubt! Her very voice. . . . His own voice shook as he spoke of it.

Since then he had been, he was forced to admit, a number of times—almost every day . . . every day . . . every afternoon. He talked to Margaret every day now for half an hour or more.

He was sure it was right, he was doing nobody any harm . . . they two together . . . it could not be wrong, but . . . He stopped. Lizzie gave him no help. She sat there looking in front of her. She despised him; she was conscious of a deep and bitter disappointment. She did not know how he could betray his weakness, his softness, his gullibility. She had thought him . . . She looked up suddenly, knowing that his voice had stopped. He was gazing at her in despair, his eyes wide with an unhappiness that struck deep to his heart.

"You despise me!" he said.

"Yes," she answered. "I do." But she was aware at the same time that she could have gone across to him and put her hand on his head and comforted him. "That's all false! You know it is. You're only delud-

ing yourself because you want to persuade yourself—it's weak of you. Your wife can't come to you that way."

"Don't take it from me!" His voice was an agonised cry. "It's all I have. It's true. It's true. It must be true!"

They were suddenly in contact . . . she felt a warm sense of protection and pity, a longing to comfort and help so strong that she instinctively put her hand to her heart as though she would restrain it.

"Oh, I didn't mean," she cried, "that I'd take anything away from you. No, no—never that. If you thought that I meant that, you're wrong. Keep anything you've got. Perhaps I'm mistaken. The mediums I've known have been charlatans. That's prejudiced me. Then I don't think I want my friends to come back to me in quite that way. . . . If it's true, it seems to be forcing them, against their will, as it were. Oh! I know a great many people now are finding it all true and good. I don't know anything about it. I shouldn't have said what I did. And then you see I've never lost anyone whom I loved very much."

"Never?" Mr. Lapsley asked, staring at her with wide-open eyes.

"No, never, I think."

He got up and came across to her, standing near to her, looking down upon her. She saw that she had aroused his interest, that she had suddenly switched his attention upon herself.

She had aroused him in the only way that he could be aroused, by stirring his pity for her. She knew exactly how suddenly he saw her—as a lonely, unhappy,

deserted old maid. She did not mind; that the attention of any one single human being should be centred upon her for herself was a very wonderful, touching thing.

Silence fell between them; the pretty room, grey and silver in the half-light, gathered intimately around them. When at last he went away it seemed that the last ten minutes had added years to their knowledge of one another.

A strange time for Lizzie followed. Edmund Lapsley had rushed into her life with a precipitate urgency that showed how empty before it had been. But there was more than their mere contact in the affair. She was fighting a battle; all her energies were in it; she was ruthless, savage, tooth-and-nail; he should be snatched from this spiritualism.

It was a silent battle. He never spoke to her again of it. He did not say whether he went or not, and she did not ask him. But soon they were meeting almost every day, and she felt with a strange, almost savage pleasure that her influence over him grew with every meeting. She discovered many things about his character. He was weak, undecided, almost subservient, a man whom she would have despised perhaps had it not been for the real sweetness that lay at the roots of him. She very quickly understood how this girl, Margaret, although so young and so ignorant of the world, must have dominated him. "Any woman could!" she thought almost angrily to herself, and yet there was a kind of pride behind her anger.

She would not confess to herself that what she was

really fighting was the memory of the dead girl, or, if she confessed at all, it was to console herself with the thought that it was right for him now to "cheer up a little."

Cheer up he did; it was curious to watch the rapidity with which he responded to Lizzie's energy and humour and vitality.

At last she challenged him:

"Well, what about Dr. Orloff?" she asked.

He looked at her with a sudden startled glance, then almost under his breath he said: "I don't go any more; I thought you didn't want me to."

So sudden a confession of her power took her breath away. She asked her next question.

"But Margaret?" she said. He answered that as though he were arguing some long-debated question with himself:

"I don't know," he replied slowly. "You were right. That wasn't the proper way to bring her back, even though it were genuine. I must tell you, Miss Rand," he said suddenly flinging up his head and looking across at her, "you've shown me so many things since we first met. I was getting into a very bad way, indulging myself in my grief. Margaret wouldn't have liked that either, but it wasn't until I knew you that I saw what I was doing. Thank you."

"Oh, you mustn't!" She shook her head. "You mustn't take me for Gospel like that Mr. Lapsley. You make me frightened for my responsibility. We are friends, and we must help one another, but we must keep our independence."

He shook his head, smiling.

"There's always been somebody who's taken my independence away," he said. "And I like it."

After he had gone she had the tussle of her life. She ate dinner alone, then sat far into the night fighting. Why should she fight at all? Here was the charge given straight into her hand, the gift for which she had longed and longed, the very man for her, the man whom she could care for as she would her child. Care for and protect and guide and govern. Govern! Like a torch flaring between dark walls that word lit her soul for her. Govern! That was what she wanted; all her life she had wanted it.

She wanted to feel her power, to dominate, to command. And all for his good. She loved him, she loved his sweetness and his goodness and his simplicity. She could make him happy and contented and at ease for the rest of his days. He should never have another anxiety, never another responsibility. Why fight then? Wasn't it obviously the best thing in the world, both for him and for her? She needed him. He her. She abandoned herself then to happy, tender thoughts of their life together. What it would be! What they could do with old Mrs. McKenzie's money! She sat there trying to lose herself in that golden future. She could not quite lose herself. Threading it was again and again the warning that something was not right with it, that she was pursuing some course that she should not. The clock struck half-past eleven. She gave a little shiver. The room was cold. She knew

then, with that little shiver, of what she had been thinking. Margaret Lapsley. . . .

Why should she be thinking of her? She was dead. She could not complain. And if she were still consciously with them, surely she would rather that he should be cared for and loved and guarded than pursue a lonely life full of regrets and melancholy. What kind of girl had she been? Had she loved him as he had loved her? How young she had died! How young and fresh and happy! . . . Lizzie shivered again. Ah! She was old. Fifty and old—old in thoughts and hopes and dreams. Pervaded by a damp mist of unhappiness, she went to bed and lay there, looking into the dark.

With the morning her scruples had vanished. She saw Margaret Lapsley no more. She was her own sane, matter-of-fact mistress. A delightful fortnight followed. All her life afterwards Lizzie looked back to those fourteen days as the happiest of her time. They were together now every afternoon. Very often in the evening too they went to the theatre or music. He was her faithful dog. He agreed with all her suggestions, eagerly, implicitly. Mentally, he was not stupid; he knew many things that she did not, and he was not so submissive that he would not argue. He argued hotly, growing excited, calling out protests in a high treble, then suddenly laughing like a child. For those days she abandoned herself utterly. She allowed herself to be surrounded, to be hemmed in, by the companionship, the care, the affection. . . . Oh, it was wonderful for her! Only those who had known her years and

years of loneliness could appreciate what it was to her now to have this. She warmed her hands at the fire of it and let the flames fan their heat upon her cheeks.

Once she said to him:

"Isn't it strange that we should have made friends so quickly? It isn't generally my way. I'm a shy character, you know."

"So am I," he answered her. "I never would have talked to you as I have if you hadn't helped me. You have helped me. Wonderfully, marvellously. I only wish that Margaret could have known you. You would have helped her too."

He talked to her now continually of Margaret, but very happily, with great contentment.

"Margaret would have loved you," he liked to say. Lizzie was not so sure.

Then suddenly came the afternoon, for days past now inevitable, when he asked her to marry him.

They were sitting together in the Horton flat. It was a day of intense heat. All the windows were wide open, the blinds down, and into the dim, grey shadowy air there struck shafts and lines of heat, bringing with them a smell of dust and pavements. The roses in a large yellow bowl on the centre table flung their thick scent across the dusky mote-threaded light. The hot town lay below them like a still sea basking at the foot of their rock.

"I want you to marry me, Lizzie," he said. "It may seem very soon after Margaret's death, but it's what she would have wished, I know. Please, please don't refuse me. I don't know how I have the imperti-

nence to ask, but I must. I can't help myself——"

At his words the happiness that had filled her heart during the last fortnight suddenly left her, as water ebbs out of a pool. She felt guilty, wicked, ashamed. She had never before been so aware of his helplessness and also of some strange, reproaching voice that blamed her. Why should she be blamed? She looked at him and longed to take his head in her hands and kiss him and keep him beside her and never let him go again.

At last she told him that she would give him her answer the next day.

When at last he left her, she was miserable, weighted with a sense of some horrible crime. And yet why? What was there against such a marriage? She was pursued that evening, that night. Next day she would not see him, but sent down word that she was unwell and would he come to-morrow? All that day, keeping alone in her flat, feeling the waves of heat beat about her, tired, exhausted, driven, the whole of her life stole past her.

"Why should I not marry him? Why *must* I not marry him?"

The consciousness that she was fighting somebody or something grew with her through the day. Towards evening, when the heat faded and dusk swallowed the colours and patterns of her room, she seemed to hear a voice: "You are not the wife for him. He will have no freedom. He will lose his character. He will become a shadow."

And her answer was almost spoken to the still and

empty room. "But he will be happy. I will give him everything. Why may I not think of myself at last after all these years? I've waited and waited, and worked and worked. . . ."

And the answer came back: "You're old. You're old. You're old." She *was* old. She felt that night eighty, a hundred.

She went to bed at last; closed her eyes and slept.

She woke suddenly; the room swam in moonlight. She had forgotten to draw her blinds. The high, blue expanse of heaven flashing with fiery stars broke the grey spaces of her room with splendour.

She lay in bed watching the stars. She was suddenly aware that a figure stood there between her bed and the thin shadowy pane. She gazed at it with no fear, but rather as though she had known it before.

It was the figure of a young girl in a white dress. Her hair was black, her face very, very young, her eyes deep and innocent, full of light. Her hands were lovely, thin and pale, shell-coloured against the starry sky.

The women looked at one another. A little unspoken dialogue fell between them.

"You are Margaret?"

"Yes."

"You have come to tell me to leave him alone?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Oh, don't you see? He won't be happy. He won't grow. His soul won't grow with you. You are not the woman for him. Someone else—perhaps—later—

but oh! let me have him a little longer just now. I love him so! Don't take him from me!"

Lizzie smiled.

"You beautiful dear! . . . How young you are! How lovely!"

"Leave him to me! Leave him to me!"

The moon fell into fleecy clouds. The room was filled with shadow.

With the morning nothing had been dimmed. Lizzie was happy with a strange sense of companionship and comfort.

When Edmund came she saw at once that he was greatly troubled.

"Well?" he asked her.

"You've seen Margaret!" she cried. "Last night!" He nodded his head.

"It may have been a dream. . . ."

"You don't want to marry me. . . ."

"Oh, yes! Don't think I would go back. . . ." She put her hands on his shoulders.

"It's all right, Edmund. I'm not going to marry you. I'm too old. We're friends for always, but nothing more. Margaret was right."

"Margaret!" He stared at her. "But you didn't know her!"

"I know her now," she answered. Then, laughing, "I've got two friends instead of one husband! Who knows that I'm not the richer?"

As she spoke she seemed to feel on her cheek the soft, gentle kiss of a young girl.

XI

NOBODY

THE only one of them all who perceived anything like the truth was young Claribel.

Claribel (how she hated the absurd name!) had a splendid opportunity for observing everything in life, simply because she was so universally neglected. The Matchams and the Dorsets and the Duddons (all the relations, in fact) simply considered her of no importance at all.

She did not mind this: she took it entirely for granted, as she did her plainness, her slowness of speech, her shyness in company, her tendency to heat spots, her bad figure, and all the other things with which an undoubtedly all-wise God had seen fit to endow her. It was only that having all these things, Claribel was additionally an unfortunate name; but then, most of them called her Carrie, and the boys "Fetch and Carry" often enough.

She was taken with the others to parties and teas, in order, as she very well knew, that critical friends and neighbors should not say that "the Dorsets always neglected that plain child of theirs, poor thing."

She sat in a corner and was neglected, but that she did not mind in the least. She liked it. It gave her, all the more, the opportunity of watching people, the

game that she liked best in all the world. She played it without any sense at all that she had unusual powers. It was much later than this that she was to realise her gifts.

It was this sitting in a corner in the Horton flat that enabled her to perceive what it was that had happened to her Cousin Tom. Of course, she knew from the public standpoint well enough what had happened to him—simply that he had been wounded three times, once in Gallipoli and twice in France; that he had received the D.S.O. and been made a Major. But it was something other than that that she meant. She knew that all the brothers and the sisters, the cousins, the uncles and the aunts proclaimed gleefully that there was nothing the matter with him at all. "It's quite wonderful," they all said, "to see the way that dear Tom has come back from the war just as he went into it. His same jolly, generous self. Everyone's friend. Not at all conceited. How wonderful that is, when he's done so well and has all that money!"

That was, Claribel knew, the thing that everyone said. Tom had always been her own favourite. He had not considered her the least little bit more than he had considered everyone else. He always was kind. But he gave her a smile and a nod and a pat, and she was grateful.

Then he had always seemed to her a miraculous creature; his whole history in the war had only increased that adoration. She loved to look at him, and certainly he must, in anyone's eyes, have been handsome, with his light, shining hair, his fine, open brow, his

slim, straight body, his breeding and distinction and nobility.

To all of this was suddenly added wealth—his uncle, the head of the biggest biscuit factory in England, dying and leaving him everything. His mother and he had already been sufficiently provided for at his father's death; but he was now, through Uncle Bob's love for him, an immensely rich man. This had fallen to him in the last year of the war, when he was recovering from his third wound. After the Armistice, freed from the hospital, he had taken a delightful flat in Hortons (his mother preferred the country, and was cosy with dogs, a parrot, a butler, and bees in Wiltshire), and it was here that he gave his delightful parties. It was here that Claribel, watching from her corner, made her great discovery about him.

Her discovery quite simply was that he did not exist; that he was dead, that "there was nobody there."

She did not know what it was that caused her just to be aware of her ghostly surprise. She had in the beginning been taken in as they all had been. He had seemed on his first return from the hospital to be the same old Tom whom they had always known. For some weeks he had used a crutch, and his cheeks were pale, his eyes were sunk like bright jewels into dark pouches of shadow.

He had said very little about his experiences in France; that was natural, none of the men who had returned from there wished to speak of it. He had thrown himself with apparent eagerness into the dancing, the theatres, the house-parties, the shooting, the

flirting—all the hectic, eager life that seemed to be pushed by everyone's hands into the dark, ominous silence that the announcement of the Armistice had created.

Then how they all had crowded about him! Claribel, seated in her dark little corner, had summoned them one by one—Mrs. Freddie Matcham with her high, bright colour and wonderful hair, her two daughters, Claribel's cousins, Lucy and Amy, so pretty and so stupid, the voluminous Dorsets, with all their Beaminster connections, Hattie Dorset, Dollie Pym-Dorset, Rose and Emily; then the men—young Harwood Dorset, who was no good at anything, but danced so well, Henry Matcham, capable and intelligent would he only work, Pelham Duddon, ambitious and grasping; then her own family, her elder sisters, Morgraunt (what a name!), who married Rex Beaminster, and they hadn't a penny, and Lucile, unmarried, pretty and silly, and Dora, serious and plain and a miser—Oh! Claribel knew them all! She wondered, as she sat there, how she *could* know them all as she did, and, after that, how they could be so unaware that she *did* know them! She did not feel herself preternaturally sharp—only that they were unobservant or simply, perhaps, that they had better things to observe.

The thing, of course, that they were all just then observing was Tom and his money. The two things were synonymous, and if they couldn't have the money without Tom, they must have him with it. Not that they minded having Tom—he was exactly what they felt a man should be—beautiful to look at, easy and

happy and casual, a splendid sportsman, completely free of that tiresome "analysis" stuff that some of the would-be clever ones thought so essential.

They liked Tom and approved of him, and oh! how they wanted his money! There was not one of them not in need of it! Claribel could see all their dazzling, shining eyes fixed upon those great piles of gold, their beautiful fingers crooked out towards it. Claribel did not herself want money. What she wanted, more than she allowed herself to think, was companionship and friendship and affection. . . . And that she was inclined to think she was fated never to obtain.

The day when she first noticed the thing that was the matter with Tom, was one wet, stormy afternoon in March; they were all gathered together in Tom's lovely sitting-room in Hortons.

Tom, without being exactly clever about beautiful things, had a fine sense of the way that he wished to be served, and the result of this was that his flat was neat and ordered, everything always in perfect array. His man, Sheraton, was an ideal man; he had been Tom's servant before the war, and now, released from his duties, was back again; there was no reason why he should ever now depart from them, he having, as he once told Claribel, a contemptuous opinion of women. Under Sheraton's care, that long, low-ceilinged room, lined with bookcases (Tom loved fine bindings), with its gleaming, polished floor, some old family portraits and rich curtains of a gleaming dark purple—to Claribel this place was heaven. It would not, of course, have been so heavenly had Tom not been so perfect

a figure moving against the old gold frames, the curtains, the leaping fire, looking so exactly, Claribel thought "the younger image of old Theophilus Duddon, stiff and grand up there on the wall in his white stock and velvet coat, Tom's great-grandfather."

On this particular day, Claribel's sister, Morgraunt Beaminster and Lucile, Mrs. Matcham, Hattie Dorset, and some men were present. Tom was sitting over the rim of a big leather chair near the fire, his head tossed back laughing at one of Lucile's silly jokes. Mrs. Matcham was at the table, "pouring out," and Sheraton, rather stout but otherwise a fine example of the Admirable Crichton, handed around the food. They were laughing, as they always did, at nothing at all, Lucile's shrill, barking laugh above the rest. From the babel Claribel caught phrases like "Dear old Tom!" "But he didn't—he hadn't got the intelligence." "Tom, you're a pet. . . ." "Oh, but of *course* not. What stuff! Why, Harriet herself . . .!" Through it all Sheraton moved with his head back, his indulgent indifference, his supremely brushed hair. It was just then Claribel caught the flash from Mrs. Matcham's beautiful eyes. Everyone had their tea; there was nothing left for her to do. She sat there, her lovely hands crossed on the table in front of her, her eyes lost, apparently, in dim abstraction. Claribel saw that they were not lost at all, but were bent, obliquely, with a concentrated and almost passionate interest, upon Tom. Mrs. Matcham wanted something, and she was determined this afternoon to ask for it. What was it? Money? Her debts were notorious. Jewels? She

was insatiable there . . . Freddie Matcham couldn't give her things. Old Lord Ferris wanted to, but wasn't allowed to. . . . Claribel knew all this, young though she was. There remained, then, as always, Tom.

Thrilled by this discovery of Mrs. Matcham's eyes, Claribel pursued her discoveries further, and the next thing that she saw was that Lucile also was intent upon some prize. Her silly, bright little eyes were tightened for some very definite purpose. They fastened upon Tom like little scissors. Claribel knew that Lucile had developed recently a passion for bridge and, being stupid. . . . Yes, Lucile wanted money. Claribel allowed herself a little shudder of disgust. She was only seventeen and wore spectacles, and was plain, but at that moment she felt herself to be infinitely superior to the whole lot of them. She had her own private comfortable arrogances.

It was then, while she was despising them, that she made her discovery about Tom. She looked across at him wondering whether he had noticed any of the things that had struck her. She at the same time sighed, seeing that she had made, as she always did, a nasty sloppy mess in her saucer, and knowing that Morgraunt (the watchdog of the family) would be certain to notice and scold her for it.

She looked across at Tom and discovered suddenly that he wasn't there. The shell of him was there, the dark clothes, the black tie with the pearl pin, the white shirt, the faintly-coloured clear-cut mask with the shining hair, the white throat, the heavy eye-lashes—the

shell, the mask, nothing else. She could never remember afterwards exactly what it was that made her certain that nobody was there. Lucile was talking to him, eagerly, repeating, as she always did, her words over and over again. He was, apparently, looking up at her, a smile on his lips. Morgraunt, so smart with the teasing blue feather in her hat, was looking across at them intent upon what Lucile was saying. He was apparently looking at Lucile, and yet his eyes were dead, sightless, like the eyes of a statue. In his hand he apparently held a cigarette, and yet his hand was of marble, no life ran through the veins. Claribel even fancied, so deeply excited had she become, that you could see the glitter of the fire through his dark body as he sat carefully balanced on the edge of the chair.

There was Nobody there, and then, as she began to reflect, there never had been anybody since the Armistice. Tom had never returned from France; only a framework with clothes hung upon it, a doll, an automaton, did Tom's work and fulfilled his place. Tom's soul had remained in France. He did not really hear what Lucile was saying. He did not care what any of them were doing, and that, of course, accounted for the wonderful way that, during these past weeks, he had acquiesced in every one of their proposals. They had many of them commented on Tom's extraordinary good nature now that he had returned. "You really could do anything with him that you pleased," Claribel had heard Morgraunt triumphantly exclaim. Well, so you can with a corpse! . . .

As she stared at him and realised the dramatic import

of her discovery, she was suddenly filled with pity. Poor Tom! How terrible that time in France must have been to have killed him like that, and nobody had known. They had thought that he had taken it so easily, he had laughed and jested with the others, had always returned to France gaily. . . . How terrified he must have been—before he died!

As she watched him, he got up from the chair and stood before the fire, his legs spread out. The others had gathered in a corner of the room, busied around Hattie, who was trying some new Jazz tunes on the piano. Mrs. Matcham got up from her table and went over to Tom and began eagerly to talk to him. Her hands were clasped behind her beautiful back, and Claribel could see how the fingers twisted and untwisted again and again over the urgency of her request.

Claribel saw Tom's face. The mask was the lovelier now because she knew that there was no life behind it. She saw the lips smile, the eyes shine, the head bend. It was to her as though someone were turning an electric button behind there in the middle of his back. . . .

He nodded. Mrs. Matcham laughed. "Oh, you darling!" Claribel heard her cry. "If you only knew what you've done for me!"

The party was over. They all began to go.

Claribel was right. There was Nobody there.

When everybody had gone that evening and the body of Tom was alone, it surveyed the beautiful room.

Tom's body (which may for the moment be con-

veniently but falsely called Tom) looked about and felt a wave of miserable, impotent uselessness.

Tom summoned Sheraton.

"Clear all these things away," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm going out."

"Yes, sir." "Dinner jacket to-night, sir?"

"No, I'm not dressing." He went to the door, then turned round. "Sheraton!"

"Yes, sir!"

"What's the matter with me?"

"I beg your pardon, sir!"

"What's the matter with me? You know what I mean as well as I do. Ever since I came back. . . . I can't take an interest in anything—not in anything nor in anybody. To-day, for instance, I didn't hear a word that they were saying, not one of them, and they made enough noise, too! I don't care for anything, I don't want anything, I don't like anything, I don't hate anything. It's as though I were asleep—and yet I'm not asleep either. What's the matter with me, Sheraton?"

Sheraton's eyes, that had been so insistently veiled by decent society, as expressionless as a pair of marbles, were suddenly human; Sheraton's voice, which had been something like the shadow of a real voice, was suddenly full of feeling.

"Why, sir, of course I've noticed . . . being with you before the war and all, and being fond of you, if you'll forgive my saying so, so that I always hoped that I'd come back to you. Why, if you ask me, sir,

it's just the bloody war—that's all it is. I've felt something of the same kind myself. I'm getting over it a bit. It'll pass, sir. The war leaves you kind o' dead. People don't seem real any more. If you could get fond of some young lady, Mr. Duddon, I'm sure. . . ."

"Thanks, Sheraton. I dare say you're right." He went out.

It was a horrible night. The March wind was tearing down Duke Street, hurling itself at the windows, plucking with its fingers at the doors, screaming and laughing down the chimneys. The decorous decencies of that staid bachelor St. James's world seemed to be nothing to its mood of wilful bad temper. Through the clamour of banging doors and creaking windows the bells of St. James's Church could be heard striking seven o'clock.

The rain was intermittent, and fell in sudden little gusts, like the subsiding agonies of a weeping child. Every once and again a thin wet wisp of a moon showed dimly grey through heavy piles of driving cloud. Tom found Bond Street almost deserted of foot passengers.

Buttoning his high blue collar up about his neck, he set himself to face the storm. The drive of the rain against his cheeks gave him some sort of dim satisfaction after the close warm comfort of his flat.

Somewhere, far, far away in him, a voice was questioning him as to why he had given Mrs. Matcham that money. The voice reminded him of what indeed he very well knew, that it was exactly like throwing water down a well, that it would do Millie Matcham no good, that it was wasted money. . . . Well, he

didn't care. The voice was too far away, and altogether had too little concern with him to disturb him very deeply. Nothing disturbed him, damn it—nothing, nothing, nothing!

When he was almost upon Grosvenor Street, a sudden gust of wind drove at him so furiously that, almost without knowing what he was doing, instinctively he stepped back to take shelter beneath a wooden boarding. Here a street lamp gave a pale yellow colour to the dark shadows, and from its cover the street shot like a gleaming track of steel into the clustered lights of Oxford Street.

Tom was aware that two people had taken shelter in the same refuge. He peered at their dim figures. He saw at once that they were old—an old man and an old woman.

He did not know what it was that persuaded him to stare at them as though they could be of any importance to him. Nothing could be of any importance to him, and he was attracted, perhaps, rather by a kind of snivelling, sniffling noise that one of them made. The old lady—she had a terrible cold. She sneezed violently, and the old man uttered a scornful "chut-chut" like an angry, battered bird. Then he peered up at Tom and said in a complaining, whining voice:

"What a night!"

"Yes, it is," said Tom. "You'd better get home."

His eyes growing accustomed to the gloom, he saw the pair distinctly. The old man was wearing a high hat, battered and set rakishly on the side of his head. The collar of a threadbare overcoat was turned up high

over his skinny neck. He wore shabby black gloves. The old lady, sheltering behind the old man, was less easily discerned. She was a humped and disconcerted shadow, with a feather in her hat and a sharp nose.

"You'd better be getting home," Tom repeated, wondering to himself that he stayed.

The old man peered up at him.

"You're out for no good, I reckon," he mumbled. "Waiting like this on a night like this." There was a note in his voice of scornful patronage.

"I'm not out for anything particular," said Tom. "Simply taking a walk." The old lady sneezed again. "You'd really better be going home. Your wife's got a terrible cold."

"She's not my wife," said the old man. "She's my sister, if you want to know."

"I don't want to know especially," said Tom. "Well, good-night: I see the rain's dropped."

He stepped out into Bond Street, and then (on looking back he could never define precisely the impulse that drove him) he hurried back to them.

"You'd better let me get you a cab or something," he said. "You really ought to go home."

The old man snarled at him. "You let us alone," he said. "We haven't done you any harm."

The impulse persisted.

"I'm going to get you a cab," he said. "Whether you like it or no."

"None of your bloody philanthropy," said the old man. "I know you. M'rier and me's all right."

It was Maria then who took the next step in the

affair. Tom, although he was afterwards to have a very considerable knowledge of that old lady, could never definitely determine as to whether the step that she took was honest or no. What she did was to collapse into the sodden pavement in a black and grimy heap. The feather stood out from the collapse with a jaunty, ironical gesture.

"'Ere, M'rier," said the old man, very much as though he were addressing a recalcitrant horse, "you get hup."

No sound came from the heap. Tom bent down. He touched her soiled velvet coat, lifted an arm, felt the weight sink beneath him. "Well," he said, almost defiantly, to the old man, "what are you going to do now?"

"She's always doing it," he answered, "and at the most aggravating moments." Then with something that looked suspiciously like a kick, he repeated: "You get hup, M'rier."

"Look here, you can't do that," Tom cried. "What an old devil you are! We've got to get her out of this."

A voice addressed them from the street: "Anything the matter?" it said.

Tom turned and found that the driver of a taxi had pulled up his machine and was peering into the shadow.

"Yes. There's been an accident," Tom said. "This lady's fainted. We'd better get her home."

"Where's she going to?" said the driver suspiciously.

"What business is that of yours?" cried the old man furiously. "You just leave us alone."

"No, you couldn't do that," Tom answered. "There'll be a policeman here in a moment, and he'll have you home whether you want it or not. You never can lift her yourself, and you can't leave her there. You'd better help me get her into the cab!"

The old man began to gargle strangely in his throat.

"Policeman!" he seemed to say. "If I 'ad my way——"

"Well, for once you haven't," said Tom shortly. "Here, driver, help me lift her in."

"Where's she going?" he repeated.

"If you don't help me at once I'll see that a policeman *is* here. I've got your number. You'll hear from me in the morning."

The man got off his box, cursing. He hesitated a moment, then came across. Together he and Tom lifted the inert mass, pushed it through the door of the cab and settled it in the seat.

"Makin' my cab dirty and all," growled the driver.

"Well," said Tom to the old man, "are you going to see your sister home? If not, I shall take her to the nearest hospital."

For a moment the old man remained perched up against the wall, his top hat flaunting defiance to the whole world. Suddenly, as though he had been pushed, he came across to the driver.

"Eleven D Porker's Buildings, Victoria," he said.

"B?" asked the driver.

"D, you damned fool," the old man almost shouted.

"Thought you said B," remarked the driver very amiably.

The old man got in. He was on one side of the motionless Maria, Tom on the other.

That was a remarkable and even romantic ride. The roads were slippery, and the driver, it appeared, a little drunk. The cab rocked like a drunken boat, and the watery moon, now triumphant over the clouds, the gleaming pavement, the houses, gaunt in the uncertain moonlight, and thin as though they had been cut from black paper, seemed to be inebriated too. Maria shared in the general irresponsibility, lurching from side to side, and revealing, now that her hat was on Tom's lap, an ancient peeked face with as many lines on it as an Indian's, and grey, untidy hair. She seemed a lifeless thing enough, and yet Tom had a strange notion that one eye was open, and not only watching, but winking as well.

It would have been the natural thing to have opened her dress and given her air, to have poured whisky or brandy down her throat, to have tickled her with feathers! Tom did none of these things: afterwards he imagined that his inaction was due to the fact that he knew all the time that she had not really fainted.

Not a word was exchanged during the journey. They drove down Victoria Street, turned off on the right of Westminster Cathedral, and drew up in a narrow, dirty street.

A high block had "Porker's Buildings" printed in large, ugly letters on the fanlight near the door.

"You'd better help me lift her in," Tom said to the driver. "The old man's not good for anything."

The driver grunted, but helped Maria into the street.

The fresh night air seemed to refresh her. She sighed and then sneezed.

"Maybe she can walk herself," said the driver.

The door opened of itself, and Tom was in a dark, dingy hall with a faint gas-jet like a ghostly eye to guide him. The old man started up the stairs.

"Can you walk a bit?" Tom asked the old lady.

She nodded. Tom paid the driver and the door closed behind him. It was a hard fight to conquer the stairs, and Maria clung like a heavy bag round her deliverer's neck; but on the third floor the old man unlocked a door, walked in before them and lighted a candle. He then sat himself down with his back to them, pulled a grimy piece of newspaper out of his pocket, and was apparently at once absorbed in reading.

The room was a wretched enough place. One of the windows was stuffed with brown paper; a ragged strip of carpet covered only a section of the cracked and dirty boards. There was a grimy bed; the fire-place was filled with rubbish.

Tom helped Maria on to the bed and looked about him. Then in a sudden fit of irritation he went up to the old man and shook him by the shoulder.

"Look here," he said. "This won't do. You've got to do something for her. She may die in the night, or anything. I'll fetch a doctor, if that's what you want, or get something from the chemist's——"

"Oh! go to hell!" said the old man without turning.

An impulse of rage seized Tom, and he caught the old man by the collar, swung him out of the chair,

shook him until he was breathless and coughing, then said:

"Now be civil."

The old man collapsed on the bed near his sister, struggled for breath, then screamed:

"You damned aristocrat! I'll have you up before the courts for this; invading a man's peaceable 'ome——"

Then Maria unexpectedly interfered. She sat up, smoothing her hair with her old trembling fingers. "I'm sure," she said, in a mincing, apologetic voice, "that we ought to be grateful to the gentleman, Andrew. If it 'adn't been for him, I'm sure I don't know where we'd 'ave been. It's your wicked temper you're always losing. I've told you of it again and again—I'm much better now, thank you, sir, and I'm sure I'm properly grateful."

Tom looked around him, then back at the two old people.

"What a filthy place," he said. "Haven't you got anybody to look after you?"

"Me daughter run away with a musical gentleman," said Maria. "Me 'usband died of D.T.'s three years back. Andrew and meself's alone now. We get the Old Age Pension, and manage very nicely, thank you."

"Well, I'm coming back to-morrow," said Tom fiercely, turning on the old man. "Do you hear that?"

"If yer do," said Andrew, "I'll 'ave the perlice after you."

"Oh, no 'e won't," said Maria. "That's only 'is little way. I'm sure we'll be pleased to see you."

Tom put some money on the bed and left.

Out in the street he paused. What was the matter with him? He stood in the street looking up at the Westminster Cathedral Tower and the thin sheeting of sky now clear—a pale, boundless sea in which two or three little stars were remotely sailing. What was the matter with him?

He felt a strange stirring and trembling about him. He had some of the pain and hurt that a man feels when he is first revived from some drowning adventure. But it was a pain and hurt of the soul, not of the body. His heart beat expectantly, as though around the corner of the lonely street a wonderful stranger might suddenly be expected to appear. He even strained his eyes against the shadows, piercing them and finding only more shadows behind them.

He even felt tired and exhausted, as though he had but now passed through a great emotional experience.

And all these sensations were clear and precious to him. He treasured them, standing there, breathing deeply, as though he were in new air of some high altitude. The boom of Big Ben came suddenly across the silence like a summoning voice across waste, deserted country, and he went home. . . .

When he awoke next morning he was aware that something had happened to him, and he did not know what it was. He lay there definitely beating back an impulse to spring out of bed, hurry through his bath, dress, and have breakfast, and then—what? He had not felt such an impulse since his return from France, and it could not be that he felt it now simply because

he had, last night, met two dirty, bedraggled old people and helped them home.

He laughed. Sheraton, hanging his shirt on the back of a chair, turned.

"Well, you're feeling better this morning, sir," he said.

"Yes, I am," said Tom, "and I'm damned if I know why." Nevertheless, although he did not know why, before the morning was out he found himself once more behind Victoria Street and climbing the stairs of Porker's Buildings. He had strange experiences that morning. To many they would have been disappointing. The old man was silent: not a word would he say. His attitude was one of haughty, autocratic superiority. Maria disgusted Tom. She was polite, cringing even, and as poisonous as a snake. She stated her wants quite modestly: had it not been for her age you would have thought her a typical image of the down-trodden, subjected poor. Her eyes glittered.

"Well, you *are* a nasty old creature." Tom turned from her and shook Andrew by the shoulder.

"Well?" said Andrew.

"There's nothing now I can do?" asked Tom.

"Except get out," said Andrew.

Another old woman came in—then a young man. A fine specimen this last—a local prize-fighter, it appeared—chest like a wall, thick, stumpy thighs, face of a beetroot colour, nose twisted, ears like saucers. The old woman, Maria's friend, was voluble. She explained a great deal to Tom. She was used, it seemed, to speaking in public. They could afford, she explained, to be

indifferent to the "Quality" now, because a time was very shortly coming when they would have everything, and the Quality nothing. It had happened far away in Russia, and it was about to happen here. A good thing too. . . . At last the poor people could appear as they really were, hold their heads up. Only a month or two . . .

"You're a Bolshevist," said Tom.

Long words did not distress the old lady. "A fine time's coming," she said.

Maria did not refuse the food and the finery and the money. "You think," said Tom, as a final word to her old lady friend, "that I'm doing this because I'm charitable, because I love you, or some nonsense of that kind. Not at all. I'm doing it because I'm interested, and I haven't been interested in anything for months."

He arranged with the pugilist to be present at his next encounter, somewhere in Blackfriars, next Monday night.

"It's against the Bermondsey Chick," Battling Bill explained huskily. "I've got one on him. Your money's safe enough. . . ."

Tom gave Maria a parting smile.

"I don't like you," he said, "and I can see that you positively hate me, but we're getting along very nicely. . . ."

It is at this point that Claribel again takes up the narrative. It was, of course, not many days before, in

Tom's own world, "What's happened to Tom?" was on everyone's lips.

Claribel was interested as anyone, and she had, of course, her own theories. These theories changed from day to day, but the fact, patent to the world and beyond argument, was that Tom was "Nobody" no longer. Life had come back to him; he was eagerly, passionately "out" upon some secret quest.

It amused Claribel to watch her friends and relations as they set forth, determined to lay bare Tom's mystery. Mrs. Matcham, who had her own very definite reasons for not allowing Tom to escape, declared that of course it was a "woman." But this did not elucidate the puzzle. Had it been some married woman, Tom would not have been so perfectly "open" about his disappearances. He never denied for a moment that he disappeared; he rather liked them to know that he did. It was plainly nothing of which he was ashamed. He had been seen at no restaurants with anyone—no chorus-girl, no girl at all, in fact. Dollie Pym-Dorset, who was a little sharper than the others, simply because she was more determinedly predatory, declared that Tom was learning a trade.

"He will turn up suddenly one day," she said, "as a chauffeur, or an engineer, or a bootblack. He's trying to find something to fill up his day."

"He's found it," Lucile cried with her shrill laugh. "Whatever it is, it keeps him going. He's never in; Sheraton declares he doesn't know where he goes. It's disgusting. . . ."

Old Lord Ferris, who took an indulgent interest in

all the Duddon developments because of his paternal regard for Mrs. Matcham, declared that it was one of these new religions. "They're simply all over the place; a feller catches 'em as he would the measles. Why, I know a chap . . ."

But no. Tom didn't look as though he had found a new religion. He had made no new resolutions, dropped no profanities, lost in no way his sense of humour. No, it didn't look like a religion.

Claribel's convictions about it were not very positive. She was simply so glad that he had become "Somebody" again, and she had perhaps a malicious pleasure in the disappointment of "the set." It amused her to see the golden purse slipping out of their eager fingers, and they so determined to stay it.

The pursuit continued for weeks. Everyone was drawn into it. Even old Lord John Beaminster, who was beset with debts and gout, stirred up his sister Adela to see whether she couldn't "discover" something. . . .

It was Henry Matcham who finally achieved the revelation. He came bursting in upon them all. The secret was out. Tom had turned "pi——" He was working down in the East End to save souls.

The news was greeted with incredulity. "Tom soul-saving? Impossible! Tom the cynic, the irreligious, the despiser of dogma, the arbitrator of indifference—Incredible."

But Matcham knew. There could be no doubt. A man he knew in Brooks's had a brother, a parson in an East-End Settlement. The parson knew Tom well,

said he was always down there, in the men's clubs and about the streets.

They looked at one another in dismay. Claribel laughed to see them. What was to be done? Tom must be saved, of course; but how? No plan could be evoked. "Well, the first thing we must do," said Mrs. Matcham, "is to get a plain statement from himself about it."

They sent Claribel as their ambassador, realising, suddenly, that "she had some sense," and that Tom liked her.

She told him, with a twinkle in her eye, what they wanted.

"They're all very much upset by what you're doing, Tom. They don't want to lose you, you see. They're fond of you. And they don't think it *can* be good for you being all the time with Bolsheviks and dirty foreigners. You'll only be taken in by them, they think, and robbed; and that they can't bear. Especially they think that now after the war everyone ought to stand together, shoulder to shoulder, you know, class by class. That's the way Henry Matcham puts it.

"Of course, they admire you very much, what you're doing—they think it very noble. But all this slumming seems to them . . . what did Dollie call it? . . . Oh, yes, *vieux jeu* . . . the sort of thing young men did in the nineties, centuries ago. Oxford House, and all that. It seems rather stupid to them to go back to it now, especially when the war's shown the danger of Bolshevism."

Tom laughed. "Why, Carrie," he said, "how well you know them!"

She laughed too. "Anyway," she said, "I know you better than they do."

Tom agreed that it would be a very good thing for them all to meet.

"They've got what's happened just a trifle wrong," he said. "It's only fair to clear things up."

They all appeared on the appointed day—Mrs. Matcham, as president, in a lovely rose-coloured tulle for which she was just a little too old, Hattie, Dollie, Harwood Dorset, Henry Matcham, Pelham Duddon, Morgraunt and Lucile, Dora, and of course Claribel. The event had the appearance of one of the dear old parties.

The flat was just as beautiful, the tea as sumptuous, Sheraton as perfect. They hung around the same chairs, the same table, in all their finery and beauty and expense. They were as sure of conquest as they had ever been.

Tom sat on the red leather top of the fire-guard and faced them.

Mrs. Matcham led the attack.

"Now, dear old Tom," she said, in that cooing and persuasive voice of hers, so well known and so well liked; "you know that we all love you."

"Yes, I know you do," said Tom, grinning.

"We do. All of us. You've just been a hero, and we're all proud to death of you. It's only our pride and our love for you that allows us to interfere. We don't *want* to interfere, but we do want to know what's happening. Henry has heard that you're working down in the East End, doing splendidly, and it's just like

your dear old noble self, but is it wise? Are you taking advice? Won't those people down there do you in, so to speak? I know that this is a time, of course, when we've all got to study social conditions. No thinking man or woman can possibly look round and *not* see that there is a great deal . . . a whole lot . . . well, anyway, you know what I mean, Tom. But is it right, without consulting any of us, to go down to all those queer people? They can't like you really, you know. It's only for what they can get out of you, and all that. After all, your *own* people *are your own people,* aren't they, Tom dear?"

"I don't know." Tom looked up at her smiling. "But I don't think that's exactly the point. They may be or they may not. . . . Look here. You've got one or two wrong ideas about this. I want you to have the truth, and then we won't have to bother one another any more. You talk about my working and being noble, and so on. That's the most awful Tommy-rot. I'll tell you exactly what happened. I came back from France. At least, no, I didn't come back; but my body came back, if you know what I mean. I stayed over there. At least, I suppose that is what happened. I didn't know myself what it was. I just know that I didn't exist. You all used to come to tea here and be awfully nice and so on, but I didn't hear a word any of you said. I hope that doesn't sound rude, but I'm trying to tell exactly what occurred. I didn't know what was the matter with me—I wasn't anybody at all. I was Nobody. I didn't exist; and I asked Sheraton, and he didn't know either. And then, one night——"

Tom paused. The dramatic moment had come. He knew the kind of thing that they were expecting, and when he thought of the reality he laughed.

"One night—well, you won't believe me, I suppose, if I tell you I was very unhappy—no, unhappy is too strong—I was just nothing at all. You'd all been here to tea, and I went out for a walk down Bond Street to clear my head. It was raining and I found two old things taking shelter under a wooden standing. The old lady fainted while I was talking to them, and I saw them home—And—well, that's all!"

"That's all!" cried Millie Matcham. "Do you mean, Tom, that you fell in love with the old woman!"

Her laugh was shrill and anxious.

He laughed back. "Fell in love! That's just like you, Millie. You think that love must be in it every time. There isn't any love in this—and there isn't any devotion, or religion, or high-mindedness, or trying to improve them, or any of the things you imagine. On the contrary, *they* hate *me,* and I don't think that I'm very fond of *them*—except that I suppose one has a sort of affection for anybody who's brought one back to life again—when one didn't want to die!"

Henry Matcham broke in: "Tom, look here—upon my word, I don't believe that one of us has the least idea *what* you're talking about."

Tom looked around at them all and, in spite of himself, he was surprised at the change in their faces. The surprise was a shock. They were no longer regarding him with a gaze of tender, almost proprietary, interest. The eyes that stared at his were almost hostile, at any

rate suspicious, alarmed. Alarmed about what? Possibly his sanity—possibly the misgiving that in a moment he was going to do or say something that would shock them all.

He realised as he looked at them that he had come, quite unexpectedly, upon the crisis of his life. They could understand it were he philanthropic, religious, sentimental. They were prepared for those things; they had read novels, they knew that such moods did occur. What they were not prepared for, what they most certainly would not stand, was exactly the explanation that he was about to give them. That would insult them, assault the very temple of their most sacred assurances. As he looked he knew that if he now spoke the truth he would for ever cut himself off from them. They would regard his case as hopeless. It would be in the future "Poor Tom."

He hated that—and for what was he giving them up? For the world that distrusted him, disbelieved in him, and would kill him if it could. . . .

The Rubicon was before him. He looked at its swirling waters, then, without any further hesitation, he crossed it. He was never to return again. . . .

"I'm sorry to disappoint you all," he said. "There's no sentimental motive behind my action—no desire to make any people better, nothing fine at all. It simply is, as I've said already, that those two people brought me back to life again. I don't know what, except that I was suddenly interested in them. I didn't like them, and they *hated* me. Now I've become interested in their friends and relations. I don't want to *improve*

them. They wouldn't let me if I did. I came back from France nobody at all. What happened there had simply killed all my interest in life. And—I'm awfully sorry to say it—but none of you brought my interest back. I think the centre of interests changed. It's as though there were some animal under the floor, and the part of the room that he's under is the part that you look at, because he's restless and it quivers. Well, he's shifted his position, that's all. You aren't on the interesting part of the floor any longer. I do hate to be rude and personal—but you have driven me to it. All of you are getting back to exactly what you were before the war: there's almost no change at all! And you're none of you interesting. I'm just as bad—but I want to go where the interesting human beings are, and there are more in the dirty streets than the clean ones. In books like *Marcella,* years ago people went out of their own class because they wanted to do 'good.' I don't want to do good to anyone, but I do want to keep alive now that I've come back to life again. And—that's all there is to it," he ended lamely.

He had done as he had expected. He had offended them all mortally. He was arrogant, proud, supercilious, and a little mad. And they saw, finally, that they had lost him. No more money for any of them.

"Well," said Henry Matcham at last, "if you want to know, Tom, I think that's about the rottenest explanation I've ever heard. Of course, you're covering something up. But I'm sure we don't want to penetrate your secret if you don't like us to."

"There *isn't* any secret." Tom was beginning to be

angry. "I tell you for the hundredth time I'm not going to start soup kitchens, or found mission rooms, or anything like that, but I don't want any more of these silly tea-parties or perpetual revues, or—or——"

"Or any of us," Dollie, her cheeks flushed with angry colour, broke in. "All Tom's been trying to explain to us is that he thinks we're a dull lot, and the Bolsheviks in the slums are more lively——"

"No," Tom broke in; "Dollie, that isn't fair. I don't want to pick and choose according to class any more. I don't want to be anything ever again with a name to it—like a Patriot, or a Democrat, or a Bolshevik, or an Anti-Bolshevik, or a Capitalist. I'm going by Individuals wherever they are. I—Oh, forgive me," he broke off, "I'm preaching; I didn't mean to. It's a thing I hate. But it's so strange—you none of you know how strange it is—being dead, so that you felt nothing, and minded nothing, and thought nothing, and then suddenly waking——"

But they had had enough. Tommy was trying to teach them. Teach *them!* And *Tommy!* . . .

They "must be going"—sadly, angrily, indignantly they melted away. Tom was very sorry: there was nothing to be done.

Only Claribel, taking his hand for a moment, whispered:

"It's all right. They'll all come back later. They'll be wanting things."

They were gone—all of them. He was alone in his room. He drew back the curtains and looked down over

the grey misty stream of Duke Street scattered with the marigolds of the evening lights.

He threw open a window, and the roar of London came up to him like the rattle-rattle-rattle of a weaver's shuttle.

He laughed. He was happier than he had ever been before. The whole world seemed to be at his feet, and he no longer wished to judge it, to improve it, to dictate to it, to dogmatise it, to expect great things of it, to be disappointed in it. . . .

He would never do any of those things again.

He addressed it:

"I did passionately wish you to be improved," he said, "but I didn't love you. Now I know you will never be improved, but I love you dearly—all of you, not a bit of you. Life simply isn't long enough for all I'm going to see!"

XII

BOMBASTES FURIOSO

THAT year, Nineteen-Nineteen, threw up to the surface, because of the storm and disorder of its successive tidal waves, many strange fish; and of all that I encountered, the strangest, most attractive, and, I venture to think, the most typical of our times and their uncertainties, was my friend Bombastes Furioso —otherwise Benedick Jones.

I should certainly never have met him had it not been for Peter Westcott. Westcott, somewhere in the spring of Nineteen-Nineteen, took for a time the very handsome rooms of Robsart, the novelist, at Hortons in Duke Street, St. James's. It was strange to see Peter in those over-grand, over-lavish rooms. I had known him first in the old days when his *Reuben Hallard* and *Stone House* had taken London by storm, and when everything seemed "set fair" for his future. Then everything crumbled: his child died, his wife ran away with his best friend, and his books failed. I didn't hear of him again until Nineteen-Fifteen, when somebody saw him in France. His name was mentioned on several occasions through the terrible years, but nobody seemed to know him well. He kept away, apparently, from everybody. Then on the very day that the Armistice was signed, I met him in the crowd about White-

hall, looking just the same as in the old days—a little older, a little stouter, stocky and resolved and aloof and observant, in a world, as it had always seemed, to which he only half belonged, a sailor on leave in a country strange, dangerous, and interesting.

But this story is not about Westcott. To cut this prologue short, then, he asked me to come and see him, and I went to the magnificent Horton rooms, not once, not twice, but many times. I had loved Peter in the old days. I loved him much more now. The story of those years of his life that immediately followed the war is a wonderful story. I hope that one day he will give it to the world; whether he does or no, I saw in those summer months the beginning of the events that were to lead him back to life again, to give him happiness and self-confidence and optimism once more, to make him the man he now is.

In the story of that recovery, Benedick Jones has his share; but, I must repeat, this is Benedick Jones's story and not Westcott's.

The first day that I saw Jones was one lovely evening in April when Peter's (or rather, Robsart's) sitting-room was lit with a saffron-purple glow, and the clouds beyond the window were like crimson waves rolling right down upon us across the pale, glassy sky. In the middle of this splendour Jones stood, a whisky-and-soda in one hand, and a large meerschaum pipe in the other. He was, of course, orating about something. The first thing that struck me was his size. It was not only that he was well over six feet and broad in proportion, but there seemed to be in his large mouth, his

great head with its untidy mop of yellow hair, his big, red hands, a spiritual size as well. He gave one always the impression of having more fire within his soul than he could possibly manage. . . .

He was fat, but not unpleasantly so. His clothes were comfortably loose, but not disorderly. His stomach was too prominent, but the breadth of his chest saved him from unsightliness. His face was a full moon, red, freckled, light yellow eyebrows, light yellow, rather ragged moustache. He was always laughing—sometimes when he was astonished or indignant.

He was forever in the middle of the room orating somebody or something, and his favourite attitude was to stand with his legs wide apart, a pipe or a glass or a book in his extended hand, his body swaying a little with the rhythm of his eager talk.

On this afternoon, I remember, he really seemed to fill the room—words were pouring from his mouth in a torrent, and I stood, stopped by this flood, at the door. Westcott, lying back in a leather chair, smoking, listened, a smile on his generally grave face, something of the indulgent look in his eyes that one might give to a favoured and excited child.

"Hullo, Lester!" he cried, jumping up. "Come along—This is Captain Jones. Bomb, let me introduce you to Mr. Lester. I told you to read *To Paradise* years ago in France, but of course you never have."

"No, I never have," cried Jones, turning round upon me very suddenly, seizing my hand and shaking it up and down like the handle of a pump. "How do you do! How do you do! I'm just delighted to see you. I

don't read much, you know. Better for me if I read more. But I've got to take exercise. I'm getting fat." Then he wheeled round again. "But, Peter," he went on, suddenly taking a great draught from his glass, "it was the most extraordinary thing—I swear it was just as I'm telling you—the girl gave the man a look, spat at him, and ran for her life. There were three men after her then, one a vicious-looking little devil——"

I sat down in the chair nearest to me and listened. I heard a most astonishing story. I'm afraid that I cannot remember at this distance of time all the details of it: it had murder in it, and rape and arson and every sort of miraculous escape, and apparently, so far as I could make it out, Jones had been a spectator of all that he described. There were discrepancies in his narrative, I remember, about which I should have liked to question him, but the words came out so fast, and the narrator's own personal conviction in the reality of his story was so absolute, that questions seemed an impertinence. He stopped at last, wiped his brow, collapsed upon a chair, finished his whisky with a great sucking smack of approval, dug his fingers into the bowl of his pipe, struck matches that were, one by one, ineffective, and lay scattered about him on the floor, and then smiled at me with a beaming countenance.

"That's a very good story, Bomb," said Peter.

"Story!" cried Captain Jones, contemptuously. "That ain't no story. That's God's own truth—every word of it." He looked at me smiling all over his face.

"I've had some very remarkable experiences," he said.

"You must have had," I answered.

He did not, I think, on this occasion, stay very long.

When he had departed I looked at Westcott interrogatively.

"That's a prince of a man," said Peter enthusiastically. "I don't know where I'd have been without him in France. Everyone loved him there, and they were right."

"What an experience he must have had there," I said, a little breathless.

"Oh, that!" said Peter laughing. "That was all lies from beginning to end."

"Lies!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," said Westcott. "He's known among his friends as Bombastes Furioso. That's an unfair name, really, to give him, because he's gentle as any suckling dove, and all his wonderful stories are about somebody else's great deeds, never about his own. Young Harper was saying the other day that if only he would tell of some of his stories about himself, his lies wouldn't be so tremendous, but his natural modesty prevents him. He's a dear fellow, and the biggest liar in Europe."

"Well, of course," I said, rather doubtfully, "if he *always* tells lies it isn't so bad. You know that you need never believe him. It's the half-and-half liars that are so tiresome——"

"No," Peter interrupted. "That isn't quite fair. Lies isn't the true word. He's all imagination—far more imagination than either you or I will ever have, Lester. He simply can't write it down. If he could he would be the greatest novelist of our time. I used

to tell him to try, but I've given that up now. He can't string three sentences together. He can't write an ordinary letter without misspelling every other word. He never reads anything—that's why his imagination is so untrammelled. And it isn't all untrue either. He has been all the world over—South Seas, Africa, China, South America, Russia, anywhere you like. All sorts of wonderful things have happened to him, but it isn't the real things he cares to tell of."

"Does he know he's lying?" I asked.

"Not the least in the world," Peter answered, laughing. "And I fancy he'd be most indignant if you accused him of it. And the really strange thing is that no one ever does accuse him. I can't remember that a single man in France ever challenged his stories, and they'd pull anyone else up in a moment. You see, he never does any harm. He's the most generous soul alive, thinks the best of everybody, and all his stories go to prove that people are better than they ever possibly could be. I confess, Lester, I have him here deliberately because he feeds my imagination. I'm beginning to feel that I may get back to writing again, and if I do it will be Bomb that will be responsible."

"How did he do in France?" I asked.

"Very well," Peter said. "But he never got the jobs that he ought to have had. Fellows distrusted him for responsible duty. They needn't have: he is as efficient as he can be. His inventive fancy only works over ground that he's never covered. In his own job he's an absolute realist."

"Is he married?" I asked.

"No. I don't think that women have much use for him. He doesn't appeal to them. They like to have the story-telling field to themselves. He's a man's man absolutely. He had a pal in France to whom he was entirely devoted, and when the boy was killed I think something cracked in him that's not been mended since. He's a colossal sentimentalist: cynicism and irony make him sick. He thinks I'm a desperate cynic—so I am, perhaps. . . ."

Well, I saw a lot of Bomb Jones. He loved Westcott more than I did, and admired him frantically. He knew, too, something about Westcott's many troubles, and the maternal spirit that is in every Englishman and Scotchman came out beautifully in his attitude to him. His stories soon became part of the pattern of one's life, and by no means the least interesting part. I quickly understood why it was that his friends allowed him to pursue his wild, untrammelled way without rudely pulling him up. In the first place, truth and fiction were curiously mingled. He had lived in San Francisco for a number of years, and many of his tales were drawn from that romantic city. He had obviously known well such men as Frank Norris and Jack London, and he had been in the place during the earthquake and fire. His picture of Caruso running out of his hotel in his night-shirt was a masterly one. He knew Russia well, had had tea with Witte, in the old days, and had once dined with Rasputin. He had shared in the Boxer rising, run for his life in Constantinople, and helped a revolution in Guatemala; and so on, and so on. . . .

But as I have said, about his actual experiences he had very little to say. It was his fairy stories, his fantastic, fabricated romances, that gave him his remarkable quality—and it was about London that these were mostly invented. I say invented—but were they invented or no?

There will, I think, be more men and women than anyone now supposes who will look back to that year Nineteen-Nineteen in London as a strangely fantastic one. You might say with some justice that the years during the war, with their air-raids and alarms and excursions, newspaper rumours, and train-loads of wounded and dying at Charing Cross station, must have been infinitely more moving—I think not. In those years, at any rate the stage was set for a play in which we must all, as we knew, act our parts. That year that followed the Armistice was uncanny, uncertain, unaccountable. Many reports there were about cities during war time—none at all, so far as we knew, about cities just after war. London, contrary to all prophesy, was just twice as full after the war as it had been before it; there was nowhere to live, little place even for sleeping. Everyone who had had money had lost it—many who had been notoriously penniless now were rich. London was moving uncertainly into some new life whose forlorn form no one could foretell, and we were all conscious of this, and all, perhaps, frightened of it.

It was just this upon which Bomb Jones unwittingly seized. I say "unwittingly," because he was the least self-conscious of men, and the things that came to him

arrived without any deliberate agency on his part—his stories and anecdotes rising to his lips as naturally and inevitably as the sun rises above the hill. He did not, I think, care for me very greatly: I was dried up, desiccated with a humour that he could only find morbid and cynical.

He had too fine and open a nature to suffer greatly from jealousy, but I fancy that he very much preferred to be alone with Peter, and sighed a little when I made an appearance.

He very soon found himself most happily at home with all the staff of Hortons. Even Mr. Nix, the sacred and rubicund head of the establishment, liked him, and listened, wide-eyed, to his stories. Mr. Nix had met so many strange characters in London and seen so many odd sights that a story less or more did not affect him very deeply.

Certainly Captain Jones flung his net with greater success than was the general rule; never a day passed but he returned with some strange prize.

It was amusing to see them together in the green hall downstairs, with the grandfather clock ticking away at them sarcastically. The little man, round as a ball, neat and dapper, efficient, his bowler hat a little on one side of his head; Jones, his great legs apart, his red face ablaze with excitement, his large hands gesticulating. They were great friends.

In spite of his withdrawal from me, he continued to tell me his stories. I began to find it an amusing game to divide the true from the false. This was a difficult task, because he had a great love of circumstantial de-

tail. He would begin—"Lester, what do you think of this? An hour ago I was going down John Street, Adelphi. You know the place behind the Strand there where the Little Theatre used to be. You know there's an alley there cutting up into the Strand. They sell fruit there. Well, I was just climbing the steps when I heard a woman's voice cry out for help. I looked back; there was not a soul there—the street was as empty as your hand. I heard the cry again, and there was a woman's face at the open window. As I looked she vanished. I ran back to the door of the house——"

Now this may appear somewhat commonplace. How many stories in how many magazines have begun with just such an incident? This, you would say, is the cheapest invention. Not quite. Jones had always some unexpected circumstantial detail that clamped his tale down as his own. I think that he was, in reality, on certain occasions involved in fights and quarrels that were actual enough. I have seen him with a black eye, and again with a long scratch down his cheek, and once with a torn hand. But what he did was to create behind him a completely new vision of the London scene. One could not listen to his stories for long without seeing London coloured, blazing with light, sinister with calculated darkness, ringed about with gigantic buildings that capped the clouds, inhabited by beings half human, half magical, half angel, half beast.

I remember when I was young and credulous, getting something of this impression from *The New Arabian Nights,* but for me, at any rate, Stevenson never quite joined the flats. I was never finally taken in by his

invention, but felt to the last that he was having a game with me. Bomb Jones's eloquence had the advantage over the written word of being direct and personal. Although you might be sure that what he was telling you was not true, nevertheless you felt that behind his stories some facts must be lying. I know that soon I began to discover that London was changing under my eyes. My own drab and dull flat in Kensington took a romantic glow. I would look from my window down the long street to the far distance filled by the solemn blocks of the museum, and would imagine that the figures that crossed the grey spaces were busied on errands about which fates of empires might hang—ludicrous for a man of my age who might be said to have experienced all the disillusionment of life. Well, ludicrous or no, I walked the streets with a new observation, a new expectation, a new pleasure, and to Bomb Jones I owed it.

However, it is not of his effect on myself that I want to speak. I was too far gone for any very permanent revival. It was Jones's effect on Peter that was the important thing. I saw that a new life, a new interest, a new eagerness was coming into Peter's life. He laughed at Jones, but he liked him and listened to him. Gradually, slowly, as stealthily as, after the rains, the water creeps back over the dry bed of the sun-baked river, so did Peter's desire for life come back to him.

"I know that Bomb's stories are all nonsense," he said to me. "A hundred times a day I'm tempted to break out and ask him how he dares to put such stuff over on us, but, after all, there may be something in it.

Do you know, Lester, I can't go through Leicester Square without wondering whether a murderer isn't coming out of the Turkish Baths, an Eastern Prince out of 'Thurston's,' or the Queen of the Genii peeping at me from a window of the Alhambra! I've tried several times to get back into things here. I tried the Vers Librists, and I tried the drunkards down in Adelphi, and I've tried the Solemn Ones up in Hampstead, and the good commonplace ones in Kensington, and it was all no use until Bomb came along. I hope to Heaven he won't stop his stories for another month or two. There's a book beginning to move in my head —again, after ten years! Just think of it, Lester! Dead for ten years—I never thought it would come back, and now Bomb and his stories——"

"It's all right," I said. "He'll never stop till he dies."

But I'd reckoned without one thing—something that had never entered my poor brain, and, as always happens in life, it was the one thing that occurred—Bomb fell in love.

It is, of course, a commonplace that you can never discover the reasons that drive human beings towards one another—even the good old law of the universal attraction of opposite for opposite does not always hold good, but I may say that both Peter and I had the surprise of our lives when we discovered that Bomb Jones cared for Helen Cather. Helen was a friend of Bobby Galleon's, who was a friend of Peter's. Alice Galleon, Bobby's wife, had been with her on some War Committee, and the orderliness of her mind, her quiet when

the other women were pushing and quarrelling, her clean serenity upon which nothing, however violent, seemed to make the slightest stain, appealed to Alice. She took Helen home to dinner, and discovered that she was a very well-read, politically-minded, balanced woman. "Too blamed balanced for me," said Bobby, who believed in spontaneity and rash mistakes and good red blood. He thought, however, that she would be good for Peter, so he took her to see him. Helen and Peter made friends, and this in itself was odd, because Helen at once asserted that all Peter's ideas about modern literature were wrong. She said that Peter was a Romantic, and that to be a Romantic in these days was worse than being dead. She talked in her calm, incisive, clear-cut way about the Novel, and said that the only thing for any novelist to do to-day was to tell the truth; and when Peter asked her whether invention and imagination were to go for nothing, she said that they went for very little, because we'd got past them and grown too old for them; and Peter said thank God he hadn't and never would, and he talked about Stevenson and Dumas until Helen was sick.

She dug up Peter's poor old novels, and disembowelled their corpses and praised Miss Somebody or other Smith's who wrote only about what it felt like to be out of a job on a wet day when you had only enough money in your pocket to eat a boiled egg in an *A.B.C.* shop.

"You're sentimental, Westcott," she said, "and you're sloppy and worst of all, you're sprightly. You've no artistic conscience at all."

Peter laughed at her and liked her, and she liked him. I don't think that I was at all taken with my first view of her. She was thin and pale, with pince-nez and a very faint moustache on her upper lip. Her best feature was her eyes, which were good, grey, steady, kindly, and even at times they twinkled. She was neatness and tidiness itself, and she sat in her chair, quite still, her hands folded on her lap, and her neat little shoes crossed obstinately in front of her.

I shall never, of course, forget the day when she first met Bomb. It was one evening in Peter's flat. A number of people sat about talking, smoking and drinking. The Galleons were there, Maradick, large and red-faced, an old friend of Peter's, Robin Trojan and his wife, and so on. Bomb was late. He burst into the room, large, untidy and, as usual, excited.

"I say," he began at once. "I've just come from Penter's. There's been a fellow there who's the most remarkable man I've ever seen. He's going round England with a circus, and three of his elephants escaped this afternoon and were found examining Cleopatra's Needle half an hour ago and being fed with buns by a lot of street boys. This chap wasn't a bit alarmed, and said they'd be sure to turn up at Howarton or somewhere where he's got his circus, if he gave them time. He says that one of the elephants is the most intelligent——"

Now this story happened, as we discovered in the morning, to be quite, or almost, true, but you can fancy how Helen Cather was struck with it.

"Elephants!" she said, turning round upon him.

"Oh, you don't know one another," said Peter, hastily. "Bomb, this is Miss Cather. Miss Cather—Captain Jones."

Bomb has since declared that he fell in love with his Helen at first sight. Why? I can't conceive. There was nothing romantic about her. She certainly looked upon him on that first occasion with eyes of extreme disapproval. Everything about him must have seemed dreadful to her. "A red-hot liar," she described him to Alice Galleon afterwards. I remember on that very evening wishing that he had stopped for a moment before he came into the room and tidied himself up a little. His hair wasn't brushed, his face was hot and perspiring, his waistcoat was minus a button, and his boots were soiled. He didn't care, of course, but sat down quite close to Miss Cather, smiled upon her, and poured into her ears all that evening a remarkable series of narratives, each one more tremendous than the last.

Peter was amused. Next day he said: "Wasn't it fun seeing Helen Cather and Bomb together? Fire and water. She thought he'd drunk too much, I presume. She can look chilly when she likes, too."

It was not more than three days after this eventful meeting that the great surprise was sprung upon me.

I had been given two tickets for the first night of Arnold Bennett's *Judith*. We arrived late, and it was not until the first interval that Peter could deliver to me his astounding news.

"What do you think has happened?" he cried. "I

give you three guesses, but you may as well resign at once. If I gave you a hundred, you'd never guess."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Bomb is in love with Helen Cather."

I was, of course, incredulous.

"But that's absurd," I answered; "that's worse than any of Bomb's best stories."

"It's true, all the same," he assured me. "He came in this afternoon. He can think of nothing else. His stories have for the moment all deserted him. He told me that he's been awake three nights thinking of her. He says that he loved her the first moment he saw her. He says that he's never loved a woman before, which is, I expect, true enough, and that he's going to marry her."

"Well, that last isn't true, anyway," I answered. "Miss Cather hated him at first sight."

My impression that night was that this was simply one of Bomb's exuberant, romantic fancies, and that it would pass away from his heart and brain as quickly as many of his stories had done. I was, of course, completely wrong.

He said very little about it to me, because he didn't like me, and was less naturally himself with me, I think, than with anyone. But he talked to everyone else, and to Peter he never ceased pouring out his soul.

A week later he proposed to her. She refused him, of course. He was not in the least disturbed. He would propose to her again very shortly, and then again and again to the end of time. . . .

I fancied, however, that that first refusal would be the end of it.

He would see in a little how absurd his pursuit was, and would abandon it. I must confess that I looked forward to that abandonment. This sudden passion had not from my point of view, improved him. It made him a little absurd, and it had checked absolutely for the moment the flow of his stories. I was surprised to find how seriously I missed them.

Then one morning my telephone rang, and, answering it, I recognised Miss Cather's voice.

"May I come and have tea with you this afternoon?" she asked.

"Why, of course," I answered. "I'll be delighted. Whom shall I invite?"

"Nobody," she answered. "I want to talk to you."

I was flattered and pleased. Any widower of over fifty is pleased when any woman wants to come and have tea with him alone. Besides, I liked Miss Cather —liked her surprisingly. In the first place, she liked me, found my mind "truly realistic" and my brain well balanced. But in reality I liked her, I think, because I was beginning to discover in her a certain freshness and childishness and even *naïveté* of soul which I had certainly not expected at first. But seriousness and balance and austerity of manner did not go nearly as deep as it pretended. She knew not nearly as much about life as she herself fancied.

When she came she had some difficulty in beginning. At last it was out. Captain Jones had proposed to her. Of course, it was quite absurd, and of course, she had

refused him. He didn't know her at all, and she knew quite enough about *him* to be sure that they would never get on. Nevertheless—nevertheless—What did I—did I know?—At least, what she meant was that she liked Captain Jones, had liked him from the beginning, but there were certain things about him that puzzled her —Now I knew him well. Would I tell her?

"I don't know him well," I interrupted her. "That's a mistake—we're not intimate at all, but I do know him well enough to be sure that he's a good man. He's a splendid man!" I ended with perhaps a little more enthusiasm than I had myself expected.

She talked a little more, and then I challenged her.

"The fact of the matter is, Miss Cather," I said, "that you're in love with him and intend to marry him."

At this she shook her head indignantly. No, that was not true at all. She did not love him—of course she did not. But there was something about him—difficult for her to describe—his childishness, his simplicity—he needed looking after—Oh, he *did* need looking after!

As she said that the whole of the sweetness that was in her nature shone in her eyes and made her austere, unyielding, almost plain as she was, for the moment divine.

"Of course you're going to marry him," I repeated. She shook her head, but this time less surely.

Then, looking me full in the face, and speaking with great solemnity as though she were uttering a profound and supremely important truth, she remarked:

"Any woman who did marry him would have to stop that lying."

"Lying!" I repeated feebly.

"Yes, lying—the stories he tells."

"But they aren't lies," I said. "At least, not exactly."

She emptied then all the vials of her wrath upon my head. Not lies? And what were they then? *What* were those romances if they were not lies? Was I trying to defend lies in general or only Captain Jones's lies in particular? Did I not realise the harm that he did with his stories? What had we all been about that we had not pulled him up long ago?

"Can't you conceive it as possible, Miss Cather," I asked her, "that lies should occasionally do good rather than harm? I don't mean really *bad* lies, of course —lies told to hurt people—but gorgeous lies, magnificent lies; lies that keep your sense of fantasy, your imagination alive; lies that paint your house a fairy palace and your wife a goddess?"

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Lester," she answered me. "I must confess I'm disappointed in you, but I suppose one never knows with a novelist —But never mind—thank you for your tea—I can only assure you that any woman who marries Captain Jones will have to reform him first. Good-night."

Even after this I did not realise the situation that was upon us. I saw now what I had not seen before, that she did, in truth, care for Bomb Jones—that that same affection would affect all our lives I had not yet

perceived. Then, two days later, came the next development.

I was sitting in Peter's flat waiting for his return, when Bomb burst in. He was a creature transfigured, whether by triumph or rage I could not immediately tell. He stood there, out of breath, swelling out his chest, struggling for words, panting. At last they came.

"Where's Peter? Oh, *where's* Peter? Not back. But he must be back. It's always his time to be here just now. He must be here! Lester, I'm dumfounded. I've no strength left in me. I'm finished. What do you think? Oh, but you'll never guess—you couldn't——"

"Miss Cather's accepted you," I interrupted.

"How did you know? How the devil——" He stared at me as though his eyes were struggling with an unaccustomed light—"Well, she has, if you want to know, and that's remarkable enough, but that's not the only thing—She—she——"

He paused, then flung it at me with the strangest burst of mingled rage, incredulity, bewilderment, and wonder—"She says I'm a liar!"

He looked at me, waiting.

"A liar?" I feebly repeated.

"A liar! She says she'll only marry me on one condition—that I stop my lying. When she first said it I thought she was laughing at me, then I suddenly saw that she was in the deadliest earnest. I asked her what she meant. She said that she couldn't conceive that I didn't know, that I *must* know, how wicked it was to

tell the untruthful stories that I did, the harm that they worked and so on. I! A liar! I!—Why, you might say it about some fellows, but about me! . . . Why, Lester, she simply didn't believe that I'd had any of the fun, been to any of the places, seen anything. . . . Of course, I see what it is. She's never been anywhere, seen anything herself. Everything's strange to her. But to say that everyone *knew* I was a liar. . . . Lester, tell me. You've been about. You know I'm not a liar, don't you?"

His astonishment was the most genuine thing I'd ever faced. I admit that I was staggered by it. I had not, of course, supposed that he had deliberately said to himself: "Now to-day I'm going to tell a lie so as to astonish those fellows," but I *had* imagined that he knew quite well it had not all been true.

But here, in the face of his most ingenuous astonishment, what was I to say?

"No, Jones, of course not—lies is the wrong word altogether, but I do think that sometimes you've exaggerated."

He stared at me.

"Do they all think that?"

"Well, yes, they do——"

He resembled then nothing so much as a balloon from which the air has suddenly been withdrawn. He sat down.

"My God," he said, suddenly dropping his head between his great red hands. "It's true then."

It was at that moment that I saw the catastrophe that was upon us. I saw what Bomb would be without

his tales: he would be dull, ordinary, colourless—nothing. The salient thing, the life, the salt, the savour would be withdrawn from him. And not only Bomb, but all of us—myself, Peter, young Gale, Alice Galleon, even Maradick. I saw, by my own experience, how we should suffer. I saw slipping away from under my very nose the whole of that magical world that Bomb had created; and above all, that magical London, the fairy palaces, the streets paved with gold, the walls of amethyst; the dark, shuttered windows opened for an instant to betray the gleaming, anxious eyes; the bearded foreigner conveying his sacred charge through the traffic of Trafalgar Square; the secrets and mysteries of the Bond Street jewellers. . . . I saw all that and more. But, after all, that was not the heart of the matter. We could get on without our entertainment; even Peter had been brought to life again whether Bomb went on with him or no. The tragedy was in Bomb's own soul; Helen Cather was slaying him as surely as though she stuck a dagger into his heart. And she did not know it—She did not know that she was probably marrying him for that very energy of imagination that she was bent upon destroying. Only, months after she had married him, she would discover, with a heavy and lifeless Bomb upon her hands, what it was that she had done.

"Look here, Jones," I said. "Don't take it too seriously. Miss Cather didn't know what she was saying. Don't you promise her anything. She'll forget——"

"Don't promise her!" He looked up at me wildly. "I have promised her! Of course I have—Don't I love her? Didn't I love her the first moment that I saw

her? I'm never going to tell anyone about anything again."

Well, all my worst anticipations were at once fulfilled. You may think that this story is about a very small affair, but I ask you to take some friend of yours and be aware that he is in process, before your eyes, of dying from some slow poison skilfully administered by someone. You may not in the beginning have cared very greatly for the man, but the poignancy of the drama is such that before long you are drawn into the very heart of it; it is like a familiar nightmare; you are held there paralysed, longing to rush in and prevent the murder and unable to move.

In no time at all I had developed quite an affection for Jones, so pathetic a figure was he.

Beneath the stern gaze of his beloved Helen ("not quite of Troy," as someone said of her) he became a commonplace, dull, negligible creature, duller, save for the pathos of his position, than human. Very quickly we lost any sense of chagrin or disappointment at our own penalties in the absorption of "longing to do something for Bomb." Again and again we discussed the affair. Bomb's soul must be saved; but how? Before our eyes a tragedy was developing. In another month they would be married; Helen Cather would marry the greatest bore in Europe, and about six months after marriage would discover that she had done so.

Bomb was already miserable, sitting there silent and morose, his tongue tied, adoring Helen, but saying nothing to her lest he should be accused of "romancing."

At last Peter insisted that I should speak to her—

she liked me better than she did the others—she would listen to me. Needless to say, she did not. Not only did she not listen, but turned on me ferociously.

"I'm proud of Benedick!" she cried. "I've cured him of the only fault he had. If you think I'm going to turn him back into a liar again, Mr. Lester, just for the entertainment of yourself and your friends, you're greatly mistaken. You have a strange notion of morality."

She was proud, but she was uneasy. She realised that he was not happy, that, in one way or another, the spring had gone out of him—yes, thank God, she was uneasy.

Well, there was the situation. There was apparently nothing to be done, no way out. This is simply the story, after all, of our blindness. Just as we had not seen the influence that was to check our Bomb, so we did not see the influence that would make his fancy flow again. It's a wonderful world, thank God!

About a week before the wedding Peter Westcott said to me:

"Lester, don't you think that Bomb's reviving a little again?" I fancied I had seen something. Bomb was a little brighter, a little less heavy . . . yes, I *had* noticed.

"His fancy is being fed again somewhere," said Peter again. "Where? He tells *us* no stories."

No, he certainly did not. His determination to achieve perfect accuracy was painful. It was a case of——

"Where have you been, Bomb?"

"Oh, just down to the bank to cash a cheque. The Joint Stock branch in Wigmore Street. I took a bus up Regent Street and got off at the Circus——" and so on, and so on.

Nevertheless, he was reviving. The Old Man was being blown back into him just as surely as one prick of Helen Cather's determination had let it out. Where was he feeding his imagination? How had he got round his Helen's autocracy without her knowing it? Because she did not know. She was completely satisfied—she was even more than satisfied, she was—— I watched her. Something was happening to her, too. She was dressing differently. Her austerity was dropping from her. She did her hair in a new way, no longer pulling it back, harsh and austere, from her forehead, but letting it have freedom and colour. She had very pretty hair. . . .

She was wearing bright colours and pretty hats. . . .

What was happening?

The day came when the problem was solved. Bomb's old mother came up to town, a dear old lady of nearly eighty, who adored Bomb and thought him perfection. She came up for the wedding. She was to see Helen for the first time. It was agreed that the meeting should be at Hortons, a nice, central spot. We were gathered there waiting—old Mrs. Jones with her lace cap and bright pink cheeks, Peter, Bomb, and myself. Helen was late.

"You know, Benedick," said the old lady in a voice like a withering canary, "you've told me very little about Helen. I've no real idea of her at all."

A moment's pause, and Bomb had sprung to his feet. Peter and I, spiritually, so to speak, rushed towards one another. This was the old attitude. We had not seen Bomb stand like this, his legs spread apart, his chest out, his eyes flashing, for weeks. The old attitude, the old voice, the old Bomb.

"Helen, mother!" he cried, and he was off.

The picture that he drew! It was about as much like the real Helen Cather as the Venus de Milo is like Miss Mary Pickford in the pictures; but it was a glorious picture, the portrait of a goddess, a genius, a Sappho. The phrases tumbled from his lips in the good old way—it was all the old times come back again. And how his imagination worked! How magnificently he flung his colours about, with what abandon he splashed and sprawled! For a breathless ten minutes we listened.

"Dear me," said old Mrs. Jones, "I do hope she's a good girl as well."

For myself I sat there entranced. The old Bomb was not lost. He had found, or Fate had found him, a safe outlet after all. He could see Helen as before he had seen the whole world, and it would do for him as well. His soul was saved.

The one question that now remained was how would Helen take this glorification of herself? Would she not resent it as deeply as she had resented the earlier "lies"?

On the answer to that question hung the whole of the future of their married life.

I was soon to have my answer. Helen came in. I

did not perceive that old Mrs. Jones felt very deeply the contrast between reality and her son's picture. Her son was all that she saw.

He took her home. I walked away with Helen. Before we parted she turned to me. Happiness was burning in her face.

"Mr. Lester," she said, "you've been a good friend to both of us. You were all wrong about Benedick, but I know that you meant it well." She hesitated a little. "I'm terribly happy, almost too happy to be safe. Of course, I know that Benedick is a little absurd about me, has rather an exaggerated idea of me. But that's good for me, really it is. Nobody ever has before, you know, and it's only Benedick who's seen what I really am. I knew that I had all sorts of things in me that ought to come out, but no one encouraged them. Everyone laughed at them. But Benedick has seen them, and I'm going to be what he sees me. I feel free! Free for the first time in my life! You don't know how wonderful that is!"

She pulled the bright purple scarf more closely over her shoulders.

"We've done something for one another, he and I, really, haven't we? He's freed me, and I—well, I've stopped those terrible untruths of his in spite of you all. I don't believe he'll ever tell a lie again! Good-night. We'll see lots of you after we're married, won't we? Oh, we're going to be so happy——"

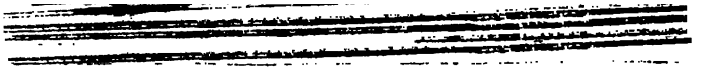
"Yes—*now* I believe you are," I answered.

"What do you mean, *now?*" she asked. "Didn't you always think so?"

"There was a moment when I wasn't sure," I said. "But I was wrong. You're going to be splendidly happy."

And so they are. . . .

THE END



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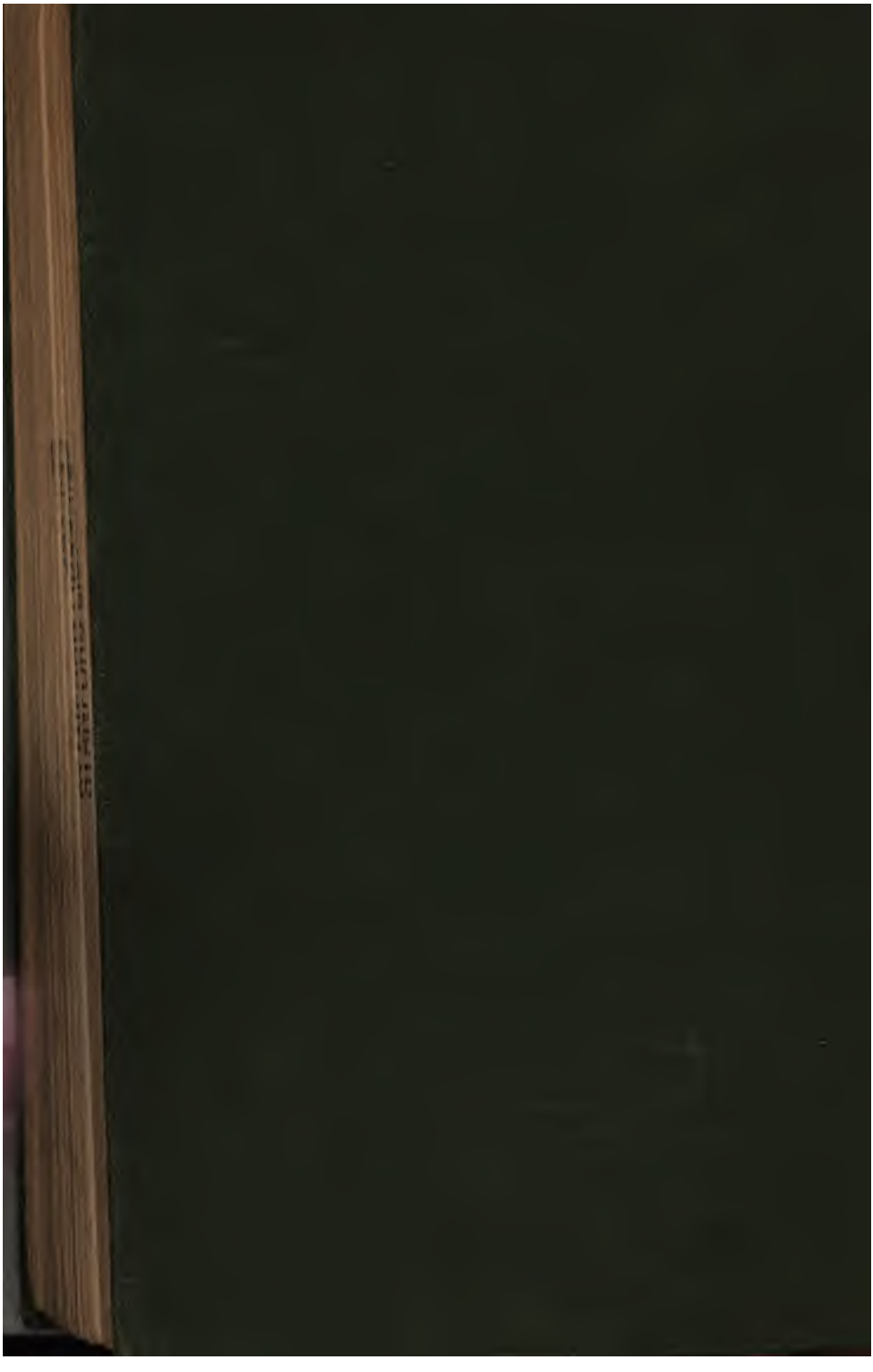
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